VOL. I
A GIRL HOLDING THE SUN
火輪を抱いた少女
晴れのち地獄
WRITTEN BY
ILLUSTRATED BY
KANASAWA MATARI
RUKEICHI ANDROMEDA
七沢またり 著 ／ 流刑地アンドロメダ 画

The Girl Who Bore the Flame Ring

– A Girl Holding the Sun –

- Volume 1 -

(Chapter 1-12)

Author:

Nanasawa Matari

Artist:

Ryuukeichi Andromeda

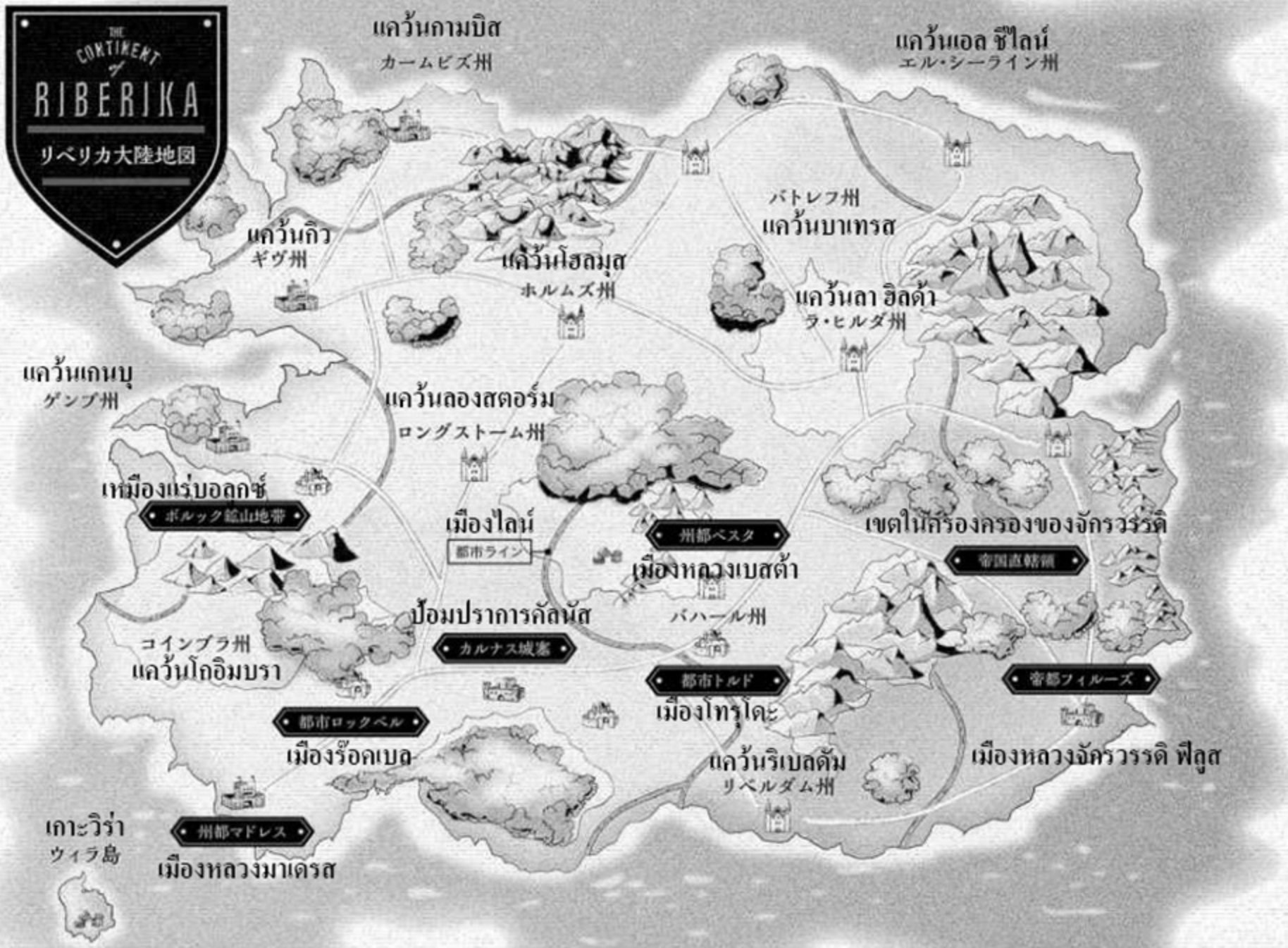
[Translated by: Oniichanyamete | PsychoBarcode]

– Synopsis –

How long I'd been here, I couldn't quite recall. From this sorry situation, I as always raised my eyes to the sky; a sky in which the great, massive sun was clad in levity. Sunlight poured gently upon all. What a blessing it would have been for the world if only the skies could remain clear. For tomorrow too, and for all days to come, I was to continue to pray for calm. To endure for those who cried, with desperation I remained in prayer.

And then, one freezing, forlorn, soulless, stagnant, drizzly day we died. Or so I thought…

*(Shares the same universe as "**The Girl Who Ate a Death God**")*


THE CONTINENT OF RIBERIKA
リベリカ大陸地図
แคว้นกามบิส
カームビズ州
แคว้นเอล ซีไลน์
エル・シーライン州
แคว้นกิว
ギヴ州
แคว้นโฮลมุส
ホルムズ州
บาเทรฟ州
แคว้นบาเทรส
แคว้นลา ฮิลด้า
ラ・ヒルダ州
แคว้นเกนบุ
ゲンブ州
แคว้นลองสตอร์ม
ロングストーム州
เทือกเขาแร่บอลกซ์
ボルック鉱山地帯
เมืองไลน์
都市ライン
州都ベスタ
เมืองหลวงเบสต้า
バハール州
เขตในการปกครองของจักรวรรดิ
帝国直轄領
ป้อมปราการคัลนัส
カルナス城塞
コインブラ州
แคว้นโกอิมบรา
都市トルド
เมืองโทรโดะ
帝都フィルーズ
都市ロックベル
เมืองร็อคเบล
แคว้นริเบลดัม
リベルダム州
เมืองหลวงจักรวรรดิ ฟีลูส
เกาะวิร่า
ウィラ島
州都マドレス
เมืองหลวงมาเดรส
THE CONTINENT OF RIBERIKA
THE CONTINENT OF RIBERIKA

Chapter 1
Sunny After Hell

The young girl didn't know how long she had been there, but she had found herself living in an old church as though it was only natural. Outside, she practiced martial arts in its square which had a stately gate that connected to a solid wall. The public order was kept by a local garrison of armed troops.

The current state of the world had been hammered into her via "education"; however, she had not learned anything practical. Perhaps there was some use to it all, but she could not remember any of the geography that she was taught.

She could, however, gain a sense of faraway lands when she raised her eyes to the sky's great flaming celestial body; only while gazing at the red, shining, sun could she feel creation's immensity. In that way she grew a fondness for the sight of a cloudless sky. She understood the sun and the heights to which it rose, and it became her primary connection to the outside world. She always enjoyed the warmth of its rays and, above all else, her hair and the sun shared a colour.

With her love for the sun, a distaste for grey skies was only natural. The sound of rain caused her to feel as though her very existence was being erased. The beloved rays that previously warmed her would be blocked by the darkness of rainclouds, and while it was a certainty that she would dislike any day of heavy rain, the worst part was the night that followed one.

"Number 8, number 13! Step forth!"

"Yes."

"Yes."

At the teacher's signal the two stood; wooden swords gripped in their hands.

"Begin."

At the emotionless signal, the two simultaneously began to practice their combat forms. The children of the church were unnamed; they selected partners and the

teachers assigned them numbers. The teachers, in His Majesty's honour, were to name the children when they came of age. They had once asked about the possibility of naming themselves, but were met with a response of pure anger of such ferocity that the matter was never brought up again. Names were of great significance, and with the help of the church's teachings, they quickly understood their importance.

The outcome of the practice mirrored a dozen of her prior matches. Her light faint was followed up by swinging with all of her might. She struck repeatedly, making contact each time, and grazed the young number 8's head. In that time, the young man kicked her with great force and knocked her down. His sword was then quickly thrust to her throat and was followed by the order to stop.

"Number 8, well done."

"Thank you."

"But as for number 13 here, you're hopeless yet again. Your memory fails you, and your movements are dull. I'm telling you this for your own sake. What a failure."

"Apologies."

"Do you forget that the only reason you're alive is because of my kindness? By all accounts it wouldn't be strange to say that it's too late for you to clean up your act."

"I understand."

The teachers wore white robes while they taught the children, who would in turn study and train in the church. Their lifestyle was harsh, and there had been an unfortunate number of children who suffered serious accidents. The girl hated her teachers. However many teachers there were, she had trouble differentiating between them. Among them appeared to be one of a particularly high status, but she didn't really understand. They all had the same face so it couldn't be helped; not that she had the will to learn. Because they taught with fists, kicks, and harsh words, she had no reason to even try to like them. The most boring part of each day was the teacher's daily exaltations because of their endless repetition at the end of lessons or training.

"We offer our greatest honours, and most heartfelt gratitude to his majesty Befnam the great!"

"We swear unconditional loyalty to the motherland!"

“May the banner of the Sun, be never sullied!”

“Death to those who would oppose the Horshiedo Empire! For that purpose, we are its sword and shield!”

What were they even supposed to be thankful for? Why did they have to swear their loyalty? The girl couldn’t remember a single thing that could obligate them to dedicate their lives to that kind of cause. Most people had neither the reason nor the will to become like swords, and being sacrificed as shields was even more unthinkable. Because the girl could not think of any sufficient explanations, she honestly asked her teacher.

“His Majesty Befnam, inheritor of our founding father Emperor Bergis’ blood, is the most revered man of our era. It is because of His Majesty that we can exist in peace and tranquility; therefore, we must swear our undying loyalty to His Majesty. We owe a great debt to His Majesty, which we must strive to pay back with all our power.”

If she were to continue such a life, the girl was sure she could find no happiness. After all, she had absolutely no idea what he was talking about.

“Listen well, number 13. To question His Majesty, and thereby our great Empire, is always-unacceptable behavior. You, o insolent one, are to respect His Majesty Befnam as you would your own father, and Horshiedo, our homeland, as you would your mother. You must never forget this one thing; engrave it into that empty head of yours if you have to!”

Still without knowing what it meant, she nodded readily in the face of his anger. Suddenly, she asked if it was okay to refer to His Majesty as ‘dad’. A father had to have a family, and if she truly was that family, then calling him ‘dad’ was the obvious thing to do. That being said, the teacher’s face burned bright red, and he flew into a rage, shouting as he struck her.

“Blasphemy!”

With his voice raised, he repeatedly kicked the helpless girl as she curled up on the floor. From that day forward, she harboured a deep resentment for “His Majesty”. In her new eyes, all bad things came from “His Majesty”. She could not understand the need to respect him like a father.

After much thought, she found she also could not understand those who would oppose the banner of the Sun. The banner didn't even resemble the sun. Compared to the real thing, it was too small, and riddled with fripperous designs. It was a total forgery; not sunlike at all.

Looking at it, she thought: *Rather than me, your flag is the failure.*

When she shared her opinions with the number 8 boy he advised, "You'll just anger him again, so it's best to keep quiet."

Even though number 8 was a fellow redhead, it seemed he thought quite differently from her. She had even asked him if he honestly saw the sun in that banner.

"Yea, and it's actually quite good; see how those outlines show the rays. It really captures the sun's essence doesn't it," is what he answered.

To each his own, I guess. She thought.

Her monotonous days in the church continued. For the children around her age, "education" and "training" continued day after day after day; on sunny days, on rainy days, on snowy days; in the morning, afternoon, and night; endlessly repeating again and again. As for reading and writing, it was a given that difficult words were pounded into their heads for memorization. They learned too, how to salute, how to behave around their superiors as well as how to use respectful language. The teachers became superior officers who offered corporal punishment as blessed guidance to those who erred in their ways.

From start to finish, they were taught standardized battle tactics for the purpose of destroying the fools who would oppose His Majesty's Empire.

For what reason did they stand? The girl would ask, and be beaten for it.

"When you come of age, you will enter His Majesty's service. In return for your upbringing, you will work hard… Well, not that I expect any of you to survive your test."

I didn't really want to bring it up, but I'm leaving now, was what she wanted to say, although she ended up holding in. Once again she sat in her room, thinking about how her compliance felt disgusting. In a room with no signs of light she had repeated that line, "All for the sake of His Majesty." She had repeated it to the point of madness day

after day. Her voice was tired and her throat was dry; it was so bad she might have died. In that place of cyclical suffering, the girl came to hate "His Majesty" to death. She began to think that she'd rather kill than honour him any more.

Through such troubling times, her only enjoyment was found during mealtime, for the gentle smiles of the other children had also faded away. The girl, without laughter, shared her enjoyment of the meals with the others. However, there was a day from which the meals too became dull.

The children were to drink a black liquid. It was a medicine to strengthen the body, but its murky demeanor was more akin to muddy water. Although the other children obediently drank up, the girl couldn't endure it. Not only was its appearance abhorrent, but its smell was worse than anything she'd ever smelled before. It tasted like rust.

Refusing to go on, and shaking her head, the girl was smacked, and had the liquid forcefully rammed down her throat. Breathing became painful, and she was simultaneously attacked with violent nausea.

"It's too soon for rejection. Was it diluted to the specified concentration?"

"It was, there's no mistake. The other children are already okay."

"… The amount varies from person to person, so even if we calculate it properly, there will always be some anomalies."

"Why is *she* the special one? Not that it'd be shocking to lose her… There's no reason to help now, so why don't we just clean this up already?"

"Not yet. Let's treat her for now. She probably won't survive until the test, but this should serve as a good reference for our 'Operation Daybreak'. Waste not, want not."

"Understood. Isolate her, and continue observations."

The girl walked the line of life and death for three days, ever nearing the abyss. By some miracle, she survived, and from that day on, taking the black drug stopped causing her to vomit blood.

Unfortunately, she hadn't felt any of its benefits, having been impaired instead. She had been dubbed as the "number one failure," and was no longer able to recognize

people's faces without great effort. At least the number 8 boy helped ease her burden in any way he could.

She did not know how many years she spent in that uneventful church. Children disappeared, and in their places, new arrivals steadily increased in number. Initially over one hundred strong, they had decreased by half, only to be reinforced by fresh faces. Their numbers had even managed to increase to 200 without her noticing.

The new arrivals already had names rather than numbers, but in the church they were forbidden from using them. Those who rebelled were placed in the room the girl hated most, and for a while, when the time came to sleep, ceaseless cries echoed through the halls. Such a sound caused the girl much grief; ultimately however, the new arrivals gradually acclimated. Nighttime crying gradually transformed into stifled laughter. The girl too found some happiness. The new children knew many things about the outside world. Their stories were always an interesting listen, and the girl worked with all her might to inscribe their every detail into her memories.

The boy numbered 123 was the best of them all; with his extensive knowledge, his stories were always the most interesting ones. When the teachers weren't looking he'd tell wonderful, enjoyable tales. Through his stories, she was able to gain a good sense of the outside world. She couldn't quite recognise his face, but she could tell he was a healthy young man with a smile like the sun.

Number 123, in only half of a year, withered away and died. Until his very end, all he could do was moan in pain. It was once again impossible to hear a good story. The girl felt drained.

Number 150, who moved into number 123's old room was the girl who became her best friend. She had a quivering voice and a face that always appeared about to cry, but it was during this time that she managed to brighten up. Before bed, number 150 would read the girl a picture book that she had smuggled in.

The book she brought featured a cat with the unusual name: Noel. The story revolved around how it left its home, and traveled the world. Because the girl couldn't recognise the writing in it, number 150 would sneak into her room in order to read to her every night. She crawled into her futon, and the two of them would read until they were too tired to go on, and fell asleep.

The picture book was truly interesting, yet what intrigued the girl most was that even though there was only one book, the story changed each time it was read. One day, the people and animals that Noel met changed along with the locales; one time Noel even defeated a horrific demon. From what she was allowed to touch, the book didn't feel thick enough for all that.

Whatever the story was, they all had one thing in common. No matter what, there was always a happy ending. The girl could always listen with peace of mind, for after all, sad stories were tedious to hear.

The most fascinating thing was Noel's crow friend flying towards the sun in one story. Just when it was almost at the sun, it became wreathed in flames, and cooked to death. Shortly after dieing in the flames, the crow became a star in the sky. In her heart, the girl was a little jealous of the crow because of how, despite no longer having a body, it was able to remain nearby the warm rays of the sun. She was sure that the crow found happiness. Upon hearing those words, number 150 made a confused noise. That line of thinking wasn't normal.

One evening, the girl was so curious she asked, "How can only one picture book, always have a different story in it?"

"… That's because… it's a mysterious book. Whenever I begin to read it, it generates a new story. It sure is an amazing book," number 150 smiled as she replied.

The girl was about to praise what an amazing treasure the book was, but stopped herself when she noticed that number 150's face looked sad somehow. She wanted to know why that was, but couldn't find out because she couldn't see her face too well. Each time she was read the story, the girl began to embrace her one dream. Like Noel the cat, she wanted to find her own happiness. She asked number 150 how to find happiness.

"I don't really know either. However, if we live long enough to get out of this place, let's search for it together."

Their small forms hugged.

The girl whispered, with a strong nod, "It's a promise," and number 150 weakly smiled. On the following day, number 150 died. When the girl tried to wake her up in the morning, she found number 150's body had already gone cold. No matter how

many times she shook her, number 150's eyes wouldn't open. When she rushed to the teachers, she heard that recently, number 150 hadn't been eating any of her food.

"It's your fault. You made her drink that strange black stuff."

"… No experiment can escape failure. Sometimes, sacrifices must be made for the greater good."

"… … … You should have died then…"

"……"

The girl glared at him with the intent to kill. She expected to be beaten as usual, but her teacher left without a word.

That night, while heading to the toilet, from a room leaking light under the door, she heard a voice.

"His Majesty wants a full report on the experiment and an official investigation. As auditor, I will issue the report."

"I'll re-submit mine, so you don't have to worry about that."

"I want to know why you keep interfering with my report. This is obviously an abuse of power."

"Don't say that; we are on schedule so I know the report will be favourable."

"It's going well? Don't make me laugh. These past few months, the number of deaths increased dramatically. Oh, but on the other hand, you do have some pretty *mortifying* results!"

"I'm afraid we simply don't agree, auditor. My Daybreak is very much on schedule. His Majesty's expectations will not be betrayed. If we leverage what we have, we can easily meet our next target."

"I'm sorry, but that's probably impossible. I might not notice some falsifications in a brief examination, but one of your subordinates provided evidence."

"… I'm sorry, but we don't need to keep you any longer. This is the end of your wanton meddling."

"You're wasting the lives of these children, and besides, deception of His Majesty must end. You will accept full responsibility for this."

"Don't think you can get away from this, o hypocrite. You bastards are the same as we are. How many children have had their lives snatched away here? You would deal them the finishing blow by make their sacrifices meaningless, so I can't understand your logic. No matter what you do, no matter who you ask, they will all tell you the experiment must be completed."

"Either way, you are under arrest. Please don't resist, or violent means will…"

"… My Daybreak, my wonderful plan won't be interrupted at this late a stage!"

Although his angry voice was audible from the teachers' rooms, none of them responded. A storm of noises ensued, then came the sound of something shattering, all followed by several screams, until finally, the sounds ceased.

In order to never forget number 150, the girl kept her picture book as a memento. It was an important treasure that she intended to never lose. As long as she had it, number 150 would live on in her mind. Nothing would be washed away in the rain.

That said, for some time after, the girl didn't have the spirit to get anything done. It was the most painful thing that had happened to her in her life. She no longer had a friend to read to her every night, and she could no longer share in her laughter. However, she had no intentions of abandoning her promise to number 150; the promise that number 150 couldn't keep. If Noel the cat experienced troubles when unable to fulfill a promise, the girl resolved to protect her promise with number 150. But before she could search for happiness in the outside world, she first needed to leave her familiar surroundings.

At every opportunity she asked the teachers, garrisoned soldiers, and even the other children, "How does one find happiness?"

The other children didn't really know, and were easily stumped. The teachers put on airs, and claimed that, "If you devote yourself to His Majesty, only blessings will befall

you," and, "When Operation Daybreak is completed, you will be able to walk about with great pride."

What a useless bunch, the girl thought, but still politely nodded to their answers. She had no time to ponder it all in her room for it happened to be a busy time.

Regardless of how many interesting stories she heard, none of the other children knew the answer to her question. What she did find though, was that many of them were willing to share her aspiration.

"If I were to head out, I'd surely want to seek happiness together. If it's okay with you, would it be alright if I accompanied you?"

After the number 8 boy said that, many of the other children followed suit as they began to flock to the girl who accepted them all with a smile. No matter how many companions joined her, she never became annoyed. She handled the situation with positivity. Their numbers eventually faded to 50, but those children who stayed with her became true comrades. From her heart, the girl was truly grateful.

The final day arrived. The day when the experiment came to an end, the surviving children were to receive names in His Majesty's honour. The number 8 boy, with a desperation for survival, clasped her hand. Of course, she nodded affirmatively. Looking out, all of the other students were assuring those around them as well.

"Attention all! Until today you have endured well. The final stage of Operation Daybreak is finally to be executed. Those who survive this final test, will be the rare few who transcend their humanity. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call those who survive this: the embodiment of the sun," with an exhausted face, the teacher began his speech.

She didn't know when the teacher had become so worn out. At first there had been many, but now there was only him. His face was ragged, and his hair was unkempt. His eyes were hollow, and his musculature had waned to the point of skin and bone. His robe that was once spotlessly white, now was stained here and there in a vivid vermilion.

"Operation Daybreak is not a failure. Don't let the sacrifices of your brothers and sisters up until today be wasted; you must survive. My… my plan was not a failure, and you are the testament to this truth. My Daybreak has come!"

The teacher, in his excitement, poured a glass of the black fluid. It was still an incomparable black; a darkness so intense that it was clearly visible, even to the girl whose eyesight had continued to dwindle.

“Finally, I shall accompany you all in a toast. With a common spirit I dedicate this to the ‘blood of the sun’, and it is my greatest honour to receive this taste firsthand.”

The teacher, twisting his face into a grin, raised the stagnant glass. The children too raised their glasses.

“In celebration of the success of Operation Daybreak, and to pray for further honour to the Horsheido Empire… We Drink!”

The teacher was the first to drink, his eyes were closed in preparation, and likewise, the children followed suit. The girl muttered a delayed ‘cheers’, and begrudgingly drank, telling herself that it would be the for the last time. On the verge of freedom, she endured.

“…ah…”

The reason why she didn’t want to drink it immediately became apparent. She felt a burning in her stomach, and shortly thereafter, not only her stomach, but her whole body began to burn. The teacher had fallen face down, and was screaming in agony. The children too, had all collapsed. The girl had also tried to scream, but the pain was so great, no noise came out. She coughed up something red, and mysterious fluids were running from her eyes and nose.

「……あ」
お腹が焼けている。 いや、お腹だけではない。 全身が燃えている。 先生が悲鳴を上げて倒れ伏せた。 他の子供たちも、一人を除いて全員くずおれている。

She heard a loud noise, and before her eyes, a red flame flourished. It was different from the sun's rays, and wasn't pleasant at all.

Nobody understood what was happening, but it was instantly apparent to the girl. It felt like the end. She sensed death looming over them as her consciousness faded. Before her darkness fell, a dark red something —— had lightning like flashes, but the girls senses were already too dull to fully comprehend.

With a hint of something cold pressing against her cheek, the girl's eyes opened. The area was pitch black, and she didn't know where she was. An earsplitting sound of buzzing, and dripping water could be heard. While trying to move, there was something soft, and something hard frustrating her attempts. Since there was no other way, she shoved them aside as far as she could, and crawled under them towards a dim light. Something stuck to her hand, and made a disconcerting noise. Like an ant crawling from its nest, she somehow slipped out of wherever she had been. While breathing heavily, she dropped down from exhaustion on the spot.

In heavy rain, the ground had become muddy, and sharp rocks bit painfully into her flesh. Freezing pellets pounded down from on high, stealing her body's heat. For the moment she stood up to evade the rain, and when surveying the surroundings, she found out exactly where she was. What she had crawled from wasn't just a hole. It was a grave, and it wasn't the only one as others dotted the nearby landscape.

At first she didn't realise it, but in the hole were several corpses. Looking closely, she saw multiple familiar faces.

Were the children from the church buried here?

Old corpses became skeletons, but the fresh ones hadn't yet lost their original forms. The pile of bodies was riddled with maggots, and the buzzing sound she'd heard was from the adult flies.

"…"

The girl was frightened, and stepping back, her foot got caught in another grave. At the feeling of something squishy, she involuntarily jumped. What she had stepped on was the body of a female child. The face was half collapsed, but she had seen it before; it was number 150.

The only face she could clearly recognize was number 150's because of how close they had been. It didn't go well when she lifted her foot as some of the corpse's flesh peeled off of its left arm. It was a gooey chunk of her hand and skin and it carried with it an eery feeling, but she couldn't bring herself to brush it off.

"It looks like we aren't leaving together," the girl muttered as she finally brushed off the hand which crumbled away.

Warm liquid overflowed from the girl's eyes.

I'm going to find the happiness you couldn't.

Having thought that, the girl prayed by the grave while weeping. She screamed, and cried, and cried some more. Her weeping voice was lost in the violent rain.

Wailing until it hurt, the girl once again regained her senses. She looked again to her surroundings. Wiping the rain off her face, she stood.

"I survived. I'm the only one to survive."

The crying girl laughed. Her feelings had exceeded those of terror and grief, and a different mood rose in her. It was joy.

I survived to search for the way to achieve happiness; to keep everyone's promise. I am the only one who can now.

"……"

From her breast, she lifted her most important picture book. The rain and soil had caused it to become tattered. She looked at number 150's corpse. Rather than leaving the book there, she felt it would be better to bring it with her.

"…Name. What do I do about a name?"

When she'd survived, her teacher was supposed to give her a name; however, the last teacher had probably died himself, not that it mattered. She wasn't sad for him at all. She couldn't forgive anyone who would abandon to the grave, a girl who wasn't dead.

People who can't keep their word are trash, so their words don't hold any sway over me. Who would work for His Majesty anyway?

The girl shouted from the bottom of her stomach.

After crying some more, the girl lay down by the graves, and while covered in mud, thought about what her name should be.

“Noel?”

The girl opened number 150’s picture book. Although blurred, the image of a hat wearing cat remained barely visible.

“Noel. … That’s it, I’ll go with Noel. My name is, from today onwards: Noel.”

The girl named herself Noel. The hat wearing, strange named, cat had traveled to many places, and always found a happy ending. The girl strongly felt that: *Like Noel, I want to find my own happiness.*

I’m not number 13 anymore. I’m Noel.

With a nod, she scooped up mud in both hands, and reburied her friends. It would have been in poor taste to leave dead bodies exposed in a field, but more than that, she did it for those who had once been good companions. In the time it took her to finish the job, the rain had stopped, and in its place, Noel’s beloved round sun rose in the sky.

The tired Noel, in the warmth of the sun, decided to sleep on the spot.

“Clear weather days really are my favourite. After all, it warms the body and soul, so I’m sure that everyone appreciates it.”

While Noel was quietly smiling, she slowly closed her eyes.

I’ll search for a way to become happy, and show them all my quiet heart. Then they can rest in peace. Please hang in there just a little while longer.

However many times she repeated it, by the time she finally slept, Noel was at peace.

Chapter 2
Rebels of the Red Circle

“Hey, Noel, it’s about time we head back!”

After shouldering his weapon the young man surveyed the area, and called out in a loud voice. Today was the same as always for he had hunted vigorously from dawn till dusk. His name was Mirut, and helping him were his fellow hunters Fraser and Noel. Fraser was wiping his sweat while resting on a nearby stump.

“What, already done? And there are still tons of game left. It’s kind of a shame, you know,” somewhere above the tree line a dissatisfied voice could be heard.

“Today’s earnings are already too much. It’s no good to be so greedy, anyway just get down from there already.”

“Right, I get it.”

Before Mirut’s eyes Noel elegantly jumped down and landed amongst the corpses of countless small animals that were strewn about on the forest floor. Each animal had an arrow brilliantly protruding from one of its various vital organs.

“Impressive as always. That’s some monstrous skill.”

“I don’t even like bows though, without arrows it’s impossible to fight.”

Mirut had nothing to gain by responding. Even a skilled hunter couldn’t do what she’d done consistently, let alone the fledglings Mirut and Fraser. He didn’t want to hear someone as skilled as she was say that it wasn’t even her specialty.

“Oi, wait. I thought we were going to take down a small boar *together*. If it’s like this, isn’t it as though you’re the best one?”

Fraser poked the dead boar. Since it was small, there wouldn’t been much praise anyway.

“Come on, isn’t it amazing?”

“Oh yea, it’s amazing. Totally amazing. You’re amazing.”

“All right! I’ll take it.”

Innocently smiling, Noel tossed some berries to Fraser for the complement.

“Oh thanks. …shit, this is as sour as ever,” Fraser scowled as he chewed the seeds.

Complaining about being hot, Noel began to loosen the top of her shirt. Mirut felt his gaze begin to drift while Fraser was happily enjoying the view.

She’s always the same. Don’t you have any awareness of yourself as a woman?

Irritated by her defenselessness, Mirut tossed a cloth over her to cover it up, and Fraser quietly clicked his tongue.

“… You could catch a cold, so wipe your sweat. Go on.”

“Okay.”

After sorting out her breast, she moved on to wiping her hair. Mirut was fascinated by her ruffled, gently swaying, fiery red hair. It was mysteriously captivating.

“Thanks for that, here’s the towel back. Well then, let’s head back and eat some food! Good food and rest are the first steps to happiness right?”

Noel took a notebook from her breast pocket to confirm her suspicions. It was one of her treasures: the happiness memo. It didn’t matter who she asked, every detail of every method to find happiness was written down. Whatever she didn’t think would work out was crossed off with a diagonal line. She always put in a great deal of effort, but still hadn’t made much progress, and she lamented each time a method had failed to succeed in practice.

“That’s how it is. All right then, let’s head back. Fraser, gather up the game.”

“Right. With just this much, we’ll eat a feast today!”

“Well, good luck boys.”

“You help too. Get the rope out of that bag.”

“Okay, I get it.”

They fastened their prey to wooden poles for the journey back. The mountainous region created an environment in which very few agricultural crops could grow, so the village populations were instead sustained by what the hunters brought back each day. That dependance on hunters was what allowed Noel to reside in the village. Their food surplus wasn’t great enough to support useless individuals which forced the men and women of all ages to work hard every day in order to scrape by.

The people were frustrated with the heavy taxes. Even though they worked their hardest, a life of comfort was out of reach. Most of the harvest was stored for sale in the nearby town, and the rest of it was levied as tax. With a life expectancy of only several decades, their continued existence slowly caused their thoughts and moods to darken. There was a rumor that a rebellion had started.

Despite all this, the people never thought to take up their swords. They had neither the will, nor the means to effectively rebell. In the village’s dilapidated bar, good friends complained to each other with their remaining energy. In that stagnated, dwindling mundanity, suddenly, an optimistic girl had materialized. With oversized clothes like those of a peddler, and a bident on her back, she appeared with a full faced smile.

For a small village, it was a serious affair. The village elder called everyone together for a discussion on what to do. Noel told them her circumstances, but since she was alone there was no easy way to confirm her story. That being the case, she boasted that she could do anything they could while thumping her chest. The elder had never before heard such shocking words, but they eventually became something that had to be accepted. Noel was approximately 16, and as she was both young and attractive, if she turned out to be useless they had planned to sell her off. It wasn’t surprising when some of that sentiment lingered in the village; however, the villagers’ children didn’t concur. Against all expectations, Noel was granted permanent residence. She found a home within a withered old building, and quickly began a life as a clever hunter. With the old bow, and few arrows that Mirut had lent her, she showed them the contents of what she had hunted in the mountains.

Her productivity was comparable to what the village’s most skilled hunter could do in 3 days time, and if she continued to hunt at that rate, it would harm the ecosystem, so she had to give the animals a “head start”. That was how she became a fully fledged member of Zoim Village.

“Hey, why are you so good at hunting? What’s your secret? Maybe some kind of trick to spotting the hidden animals?”

“Not really. I just, know, you know? I can tell where they hide, and where to shoot to bring down a bird. Wait, aren’t I amazing?”

“You are, it’s truly incredible. If you get it, how about giving me a hand?”

“Ha—, this one’s the type with inborn talent you know. Isn’t it enviable? If you got her as a wife, you wouldn’t have to worry about food for the rest of your life.”

“I don’t know about that…”

“It’s totally true, there’s no mistaking it.”

While Fraser was making jokes, Noel had an expression of cluelessness, and like that Fraser continued on, “… Hey, about what I was saying earlier, isn’t it about time you started thinking about that?”

“That being who I’ll marry?”

“Yea, that. I said that seriously, so what about it? I’ll say this now, but I’m serious.”

Fraser enquired with an unusually serious look. Noel was the number one choice for most of the young men in the village. Her looks were outstanding, and her hunting skill was unparalleled. Already, many of them had fallen for her charms. The one who gained her as a wife would gain considerable status in the village, but that wasn’t something that she was going to notice on her own. She had a total lack of the “femininity” common to others of her age.

“No, I appreciate the sentiment, but can you stop?”

“But, why not?”

“Well, I don’t know if the marriage will keep me from finding happiness. The women of the village were seriously complaining about their own marriages you know.”

She pulled out her happiness memo to confirm. Peeking at it from the side, Fraser could see that the marriage entry had unfortunately been crossed out.

“Don’t listen to those disgruntled old hags. It’ll be fine if it’s me, and we’ll definitely find happiness!” Fraser countered vehemently.

He’d checked to make sure he was truly in love, and amongst the girls in the village, there had only been one conclusion.

“Who I like, and those kinds of questions, are things I have absolutely no idea of the answer to. There isn’t really anyone I want to live with right now, so could you hold off on asking me for a bit?” Noel smiled while clearly rejecting him.

She’s that kind of woman, I guess. Totally different from the others. I have no idea what she’s thinking.

She was usually aloof and lighthearted, but sometimes her expression changed. From time to time a darkness would show through her cheerful demeanor. It was most distinguished on rainy days. During the nights that followed, it was as though she’d been possessed by another, more gloomy, personality to the point where it became difficult to speak to her.

It once rained heavily for a day, and during the night that followed, a drunken hooligan had tried sneaking into Noel’s bed. The man had run to the village elder in fear of retaliation, even though he knew there were ramifications for what he had attempted. He drew a picture of what had scared him, and after some time, the figure of Noel could be made out. It now felt as though the tale had been the drink speaking; however, the morning after the incident, the man had been found half-dead, and sprawled out in the village square. It had been so bad that it hurt to look at, and since then, the man had avoided Noel as much as possible. He had the eyes of a frightened dog, and after being driven from the village, no one knew what befell him.

Fraser was well aware of this, and so he made himself clear. Mirut sighed to himself, as he was unconsciously upset.

While they were heading down the mountain to return to the village, a tall young man called out to them. The lanky, docile man was named Kraft. He rose from working the field with a hoe in his hands.

“Hey guys!”

“What is it Kraft? If you stand around there, we won’t have any food.”

Fraser clapped him on the back. Their personalities, polar opposites, but they clearly got along fine somehow.

“It’s not like that. It was so noisy in the village. I think something happened.”

“We’ll find out soon enough.”

“But, what if bandits attacked?”

It wasn’t rare for bandit clans to attack the village. The villagers worked together to defend themselves in their own way. They would obediently hand over their money to avoid unnecessary casualties when confronted with a large company of bandits; however, if the bandits were few in number the villagers would quickly reverse the situation and reappropriate their belongings instead.

“Wow, it really is noisy eh. Yup, maybe it’s a festival. Festivals are always fun right?”

Noel was as optimistic as ever.

“Any way you look at it, there’s no way a festival would happen this time of year.”

“Festivals are fun, right? There’ll be tons of lovely treats to eat. There will be drums, and flutes, and it’ll be interesting. I did some practicing, so I’m pretty good at…”

“Now is not the time for your positive interpretations. Look at the flames billowing into the sky!”

“Oi, what!?”

Fraser and Kraft’s faces went pale. From the direction of Zoim Village rose black smoke. There weren’t any bandit clans that would resort to arsony in the surrounding area, as that would diminish their future earnings; however, it was still possible that a new band was passing through.

“W-w-what do we do? Hey, Fraser, we… what direction should we run in?”

“Don’t fuck with me! We can’t just abandon our people you dumbass!” Fraser swatted Kraft in the back of the head.

Naturally, Mirut was of the same opinion. He had no intentions of sacrificing his family. Either of them would have tried to help, even if it meant going alone.

“Okay, it’s about time we headed back then. I can tell from your words you have good intentions.”

“Noel, y-you too? If those bandits are a violent bunch, you might be killed.”

“You don’t have to worry, I’ll be okay. I’ll just kill everything that gets in my way. Otherwise things would get way too out of hand.”

As she grasped the bident on her back in her right hand, Noel’s smiling face let out a short laugh. Kraft was left speechless at the sight. He almost couldn’t believe in what he was seeing. There was no way that a bunch of peasant farmers, and hunters could take on an organized bandit group; only if the ones in question were normal.

This stupid woman is seriously going to fight them? It’s like she doesn’t realize the difference between humans and animals.

Humans don’t think like animals, they are not so easily hunted. He’d never killed people before, but even Mirut knew that much. To top it all off, despite Noel’s skill with a bow, she chose to use a spear; her skill with which had never been confirmed. While she’d always carried it on her, it hadn’t ever been useful during a hunt, and overcoming such a difficult situation wasn’t a joke.

“Noel. We don’t know who we’re up against just yet. We can’t let this get out of hand. You might be able to recklessly die out there without worries, but those of us with families absolutely can’t get involved right now.”

“Right, I get it.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes, I understand.”

Noel curled her right hand into a fist in front of her chest in a military style salute. She over-exaggerated the movement in a joking fashion, but then her back straightened out, and her expression became serious. She no longer appeared to be a hunter, and instead looked like a professional soldier.

"… A-am I doing it right?"

"Ah, should I do it too?"

Making eye contact with each other, Fraser and Kurt mimicked her. Even without pointing it out, the differences between them were clear.

"Why don't we all just fool around then!? Look, if you're going to say something stupid, just leave."

Mirut then started towards the village while shrugging his shoulders.

Upon reaching to the village, they found many men with red cloths wrapped around their arms. It didn't seem as though any looting had occurred, and the sound of screams was totally absent. From the elder's house, which towered over the village, the usual flag was hanging at a different angle. However, they did not understand why the flag now consisted of two red, diagonal lines displayed on a field of white.

"Fraser, you're safe!"

"Uh, yeah, but what's all this?"

"I don't really know either. Suddenly, so many of them appeared."

Fraser had confirmed his mother's safety, but Mirut was still searching for his only remaining family member. When his eyes met with the one he was after, they rushed to each other.

"Onii-chan!"

"Cal! They didn't do anything to you did they?"

"No, but it was scary."

"It's all right now. Onii-chan is here."

Mirut hugged Cal, who finally showed a smiling face.

"You seem so happy that I'm a little jealous. Hey, can you make families without getting married?" Noel asked something ridiculous as she pulled out her memo.

She closed in on the defenseless face, but was waved away by a hand.

“Oi, wait. What’s the situation? It’s nice you’re happy and all, but this might be seriously bad.”

“Yup. The village has been occupied by some unknown people after all.”

Noel understood, and nodded firmly.

“If you understand, behave yourself!”

Mirut left the tomfoolery to the others, and headed off to observe the bandit-like men who had come to the village. Each of them had a red cloth wrapped around his arm, and they were all armed with spears, swords, and the like. Their outfits were tattered, and they lacked a sense of unity. They were also disproportionately mixed, and seemed to foster a wider spread of demographics than the usual roaming bands.

“But still, who are these guys? They seem somehow different from raiders.”

“They seem kind of mish-mashed. Look at that guy, he’s holding a bamboo broom. Do you think he’s using it as a weapon?”

Noel hurriedly pointed out.

“If you’re so loud, we’ll stand out.”

“Nobody heard, and we haven’t been spotted yet.”

“It’s still a problem even if the chances of them noticing are 10 000 to 1.”

“I guess so.”

While that was happening, one man stepped forth from the group. Different from the others, his figure was a size larger, and his equipment was of a higher quality. Rather than a bandit, he had the demeanor of a seasoned mercenary. He was distinguishable at a glance. The boisterous lot went silent the instant he called for it. The man who represented them surveyed his surroundings, and spoke in a great, resonating voice.

“We are the ones who arose in opposition of the Viceroy of Coimbra, Grohl Wardka and his oppressive regime; we are the army of the Red Circle!”

“Eh, the … army of the Red Circle?”

The village elder asked while bowing, and Ristih nodded.

“That is correct. They call me Ristih, and I serve as the head of the Red Circle’s army. We have shed much blood before this point. To remember this, we rap a red cloth around our right arms. We carve our red wheels from the flags of our foes, and covet the readiness to hand down judgement on the ones we oppose!”

“I-I see…”

“Our Red Circle army aims to take the capital, sweeping down from North Coimbra, and we do nothing less than work towards our destiny each and every day. Our efforts are proof of the gross tyranny of the despotic Grohl. By now our exploits should have made themselves known to the Emperor himself! When that happens, the maggots in charge will receive their just rewards.”

Unlike the prideful, assertive Ristih, the village elder had only become perplexed. If what he said was true, then the secluded village was entirely unrelated. The only time that politics ever mattered there was when the tax collectors made their rounds, or when the military enlisted the young men.

Mirut had the feeling he knew where this was going, but he stayed silent. He kept his eyes peeled in case it was to happen. Noel, meanwhile, had her eyes closed. From time to time, her body tottered such that Mirut thought she might actually have been sleeping. He wanted her to be more cautious, but remained silent because he didn’t want to cause a disturbance. Cal was holding Noel up with both hands from behind. Mirut’s little sister was very attached to the carefree Noel.

“What do you want with this atrite village? Despite our hospitality, our stockpiles are paltry.”

“Amongst brethren, such extortion is unthinkable. Were we to do such things, we’d be no better than the ones we fight. We only have one request. We simply would ask that those of a mind with us step forward and join our cause. Anybody can help, for without such support, we wouldn’t be able to change anything. We’ll accept those willing to take up their swords, for now is their time!”

“Basically, you want us to take up arms in revolt against the Coimbra administration.”

To the concerned elder's further wrinkling brow, Ristih sharply pronounced, "Put simply, yes. However, we have no intentions of opposing His Imperial Majesty, or the empire at large. Our only goal is to remove the parasites from their leadership over Coimbra. Never shall our noble cause be misconstrued as treason!"

In case they were refused, the soldiers spread out in preparation for looting. Although the rebel leader had promised not to kill anybody, there had been a strong emphasis on how other people had generously supplied them. Rebellion, however, was still a serious crime. If the village provided support and the rebellion was a failure, they would surely meet with a tragic fate. The elder hesitated for some time, before capitulating with a helpless expression.

"I understand. Some of our young will participate, so please show mercy."

"I'm grateful. To go forth in opposition of the misdeeds of the Grohl, and live our lives for the betterment of the people is our mission. Elder, we will be sure to prove your judgement to be correct!" Ristih exclaimed before mounting his horse.

With those heavy words the cavalry advanced, and the rest of the Red Circle army began to march in a loose formation. They had only been the vanguard of the rebel army and the remaining corps were to arrive later. With so many people arriving, maintaining order was becoming an impossibility. While Mirut was thinking about such things, the elder trudged back to the villagers with his shoulders stooped.

"Everyone, it's as you've heard; I won't force you to comply. Unfortunately, more soldiers will be passing through."

"What!? What could they fix, rebellion is a serious matter! If we lose our workers we'll lose our lives!"

"Even so, our village would have been destroyed had we not allowed this. Is there anyone who could have made a better choice!?"

"Elder, what if we secretly informed the military?"

"There is no way they wouldn't notice. They might pretend not to, but they know. If we did that, by the time help arrived from the south, we'd already be dead. I had no choice. I understand it will be hard to survive, but survive we must."

The elder let out a quivering voice while lowering his head. No voices of opposition arose. Even with the current situation, their village wasn't one that the national army would attempt to protect, instead, they would probably wait and see how it all played out. It was true that the people harboured resentment towards the Grohls' rule. There would likely be a few who would wish to improve things by participating in the revolt. If the army enlisted soldiers from fellow northerners who also suffered from poverty, they wouldn't have a strong will to destroy the rebellion, but rather feel that the rebels were a mouthpiece for their own complaints as well.

The elder who had made up his mind, and those who were in agreeance with him gathered together and spoke in an uproar. They were discussing who to send off with the rebels. The participants began to focus on Mirut and the hunters, and eventually turned their gazes to Kraft and the farmers as well. In total, ten were called. Of course Noel was chosen as well. In such times it was a given to offer up the strangers and second sons.

"Hey, could everyone listen for a bit?"

"What?"

Noel turned to them all with a serious face, and said.

"Uh, well, I say it'd be better if you collected your families, and fled to somewhere safe."

"… what's that supposed to mean?"

"I agree with her. Why is it that we aren't allowed to tell others to run away with their families? Do we have to join the army of the Red Circle?"

Kraft tilted his head in curiosity. The others were also making puzzled expressions. It was only natural that they were supposed to join so that the village could avert destruction. It was also ridiculous to assume they would fight for an army that had taken them away from their families. Neither Cal, nor Fraser's mother could defend themselves; without help they would die.

"Yupyup, and somehow, I get the feeling that at this rate, once we've left the remaining troops might just pillage anyway."

"——eh?"

“Oi, wait. That kind of retarded thing couldn’t possibly happen!”

Fraser may have shouted, but Noel didn’t care for what he had to say.

“Well, even if it’s been stated by the Army of the Red Circle, they’re pretty disorganised. They are more like roaming bandits than a well disciplined military corps.”

“But…”

“In order that you don’t regret anything, I recommend fleeing with your loved ones. Not that I’m forcing you or anything…”

As Noel spoke, she grabbed Cal’s hand and began to walk.

“Hey! What are you doing with Cal!?”

Mirut began to shout, and Noel smiled gently at him.

“Cal’s my friend, so I’ll protect her. Right?”

“Thank you Noel-chan!”

“Yup. Ah, do you want to read my picture book together? It always has a new story in it, so you’d better prepare for whatever kind of story we’ll discover.”

“I do! Make sure you’re ready too, okay!”

“Hey, stop! Don’t just do things like that!”

While standing there Mirut was hesitant. Taking his sister despite usually not thinking much, Noel’s words did hold some truth. He was unsure of what to do.

Damn, what do I do!?

“That’s a pretty amusing face, Mirut. Like you just ate something sour. Hey, it’s fine if I laugh right?”

Noel had a habit of asking permission to do things after she had started, and this time was no different. Mirut was so frustrated he simply shouted, “Shut up! I’m thinking so stop!”

“Okay, I get it.”

Noel again saluted in perfect form; however, the smile on her face hadn’t vanished. It was as though she couldn’t understand the gravity of the situation she was in. He found himself unable to come to a conclusion. He needed to stop focusing on Noel’s antics, and to refocus on the task at hand.

We could probably head towards the southern Rockbell district. We’d also have to make sure to escape at an appropriate time. At any rate, it would be best to keep this hidden from the other villagers.

Following the highway south would bring them from Zoim village to the Rockbell district which was halfway between the northern and southern regions. The area was relatively large such that the rebel army couldn’t possibly comb its entirety.

“Alright, I guess I’ll go talk to the elder. What Noel’s saying might not be impossible, I think.”

“It’s true that we won’t know what’ll happen, eh. That Ristih guy’s story’s suspicious too. We can’t trust him for now.”

“Is it like that then? He seemed like a pretty diligent guy to me.”

“Life’s not so easy that you can tell between good and bad just by looks.”

Fraser brushed those words aside as nonsense, and Mirut was of the same opinion. Ristih had claimed to be frantically fighting the tyranny, but it seemed only superficial. They didn’t seem desperate at all, and their actions so far hadn’t been ones that the poor would readily support.

“But, the surrounding villages have probably had this happen. W-what should we do?”

Kraft’s large body was shaking. Despite his imposing build, Kraft had less spirit than most. Mirut knew Kraft was beyond help, and offered some advice. He was the type who had to help the people that he knew.

“For now we’ll hide ourselves in the mountains. We won’t have to worry about food if we stay at the hunting shack. We should be able to last for some time.”

“That’s it! You’re so smart Mirut. I’ll get my dad and mum now!”

“I will too.”

Several others followed after the gangly Kraft.

“Noel, I’m sorry, but can you look after Cal until I get back. I’m counting on you to protect her.”

“Okay, I’ll do that.”

Noel nodded in affirmation, and turned to face the elder’s underlings. It was reckless to keep the little sister who had just recently turned ten, for she could easily become a burden during their escape. They planned on leaving as soon as Mirut returned. If it was only a small group that ran, it would take some time before the other villagers noticed people were missing.

“Sorry, but it looks like I’m in charge of babysitting. Think it’s time for the picture book? Somehow, it seems like it.”

“It’ll be okay when we’re out of the village. Such a special thing should be read a time when we can fully appreciate it. We can’t let it go to waste, right?” at Cal’s nervous words, Noel smiled.

“Noel-oneechan, aren’t you scared? Even though all of the people here are panicking?”

“I guess I’m not scared at all right now. I mean, it isn’t even raining, and the weather is great.”

Noel raised her gaze to the sky. The sun’s form was absent, but in its place, a half-moon illuminated the world.

“It’s all right if it isn’t raining?”

“Yup. Falling rain heralds rising horrors. It has always been that way… Rainy days are full of bad things.”

Noel spat in irritation.

“Rainy days do get you down. You’re always smiling on sunny days, but on rainy ones you make a really scary face.”

“Clear skies have only good news. Aa—h, I wish it would always be cloudless.”

The sun brought energy to Noel, and her prided hair shared its colour. She had been anointed by sunlight upon choosing her name. The moon and stars set her heart at ease; their lazy, shimmering light brought down an easy mood which was good for sleeping. So it was that Noel extolled such cloudless days.

“But, wouldn’t the crops all die?”

“… Yup, that’s true.”

“See, see, rain is important. When it rains, we don’t need to water the fields!”

While listening to Cal’s words, Noel remembered that day; the hellish scene she had failed to push from her mind: the putrid smell that assailed her nose, the harsh buzzing of the flies, the hole packed with haplessly abandoned corpses, and the lifeless bodies of her precious friends. Such was the end of those unable to find happiness; blanketed by a cold rain that veiled the world. She came to hate the rain, and she felt her existence chip away with every drop.

“Even so, I still don’t like the rain. In fact, I hate it.”

Chapter 3
Broken Scales

It had only been a century since King Bergis Wardka had led the northern mountain kingdom of Horsheido to fully conquer the continent of Libelika. The continent had never before been truly unified. Though Horsheido had humble beginnings, it had begun to quickly amass power, and after its preparations were complete, it had begun its advance on the south. It swept through the south as though to vent the rage that had built up after many years of marginalisation. The soldiers of Horsheido displayed inhuman battle prowess, crushing all those who stood in their way without exception. Due to their utter devotion to conquering any disputed territory, their weaker neighbours fell before the unstoppable might of the Horsheido military as an unparalleled campaign completely annexed the entirety of the Libelika continent.

The Bergis unification built its capital city of Ferdos in the most fertile land in the east, and divided the rest of the continent into 12 provinces for ease of rule. The kingdom of Horsheido became an empire, with Bergis its founding father.

Bergis deployed his skilled retainers and blood relatives to maintain order in the provinces, allowing them discretionary authority, and assigning only loose guidelines and vague directives. There were those who advised against such a diffusion of power, but Bergis quickly and decisively acted upon his carefully considered plans. His judgement eventually proved to be correct when several rebellions were swiftly suppressed. The chosen viceroys surpassed all expectations in governing ability, and they oversaw well thought out projects that became the cornerstones of the empire. So long as a relationship of trust was maintained between the emperor and his viceroys, they were able to respond quickly to any situation, and it proved to be an administration that had no gaps within its grasp.

The strict adherence to and widespread adoption of a social policy of “Generosity to the subdued, severity to the disobedient,” incentivised the rulers of each province take up their swords, and fall in line with the rest of the empire. When a former enemy was appointed viceroy of the Ribeldam province, it proved that those with ability would rise to prominence regardless of their background. Bergis became known as “the Emperor of the Sun” for his numerous accomplishments, and he died retaining the overwhelming support of his vassals, and the plebeians alike.

The death of a great ruler was usually followed by a struggle for succession, and Horsheido was no exception. The infighting, however, did little to shake the foundations from which the empire had been constructed. A second generation emperor successfully succeeded the throne, and all the way through to the third generation emperor Befnam, a great focus had continued to be placed upon maintaining stability which led to an era of peace and tranquility.

Despite the calmness of the times, irregular circumstances still existed; the foremost example of which resided in the southwestern province of Coimbra. Having once been a well renowned trading centre, the emblem on its flag was a balance scale. It had great lengths of coast, and its mountainous northern regions had boasted many lucrative gold mines. The famous mines brought prosperity to the province, and only ten years earlier it had been one of the most affluent provinces on the entire continent.

Through trade with the peoples of the southern islands, spices, oceanic produce, and jewelry had been brought to Coimbra. The ensuing cultural exchange had breathed new life into the entire continent. Luxuries like opera became so prevalent in Coimbra that many began to see such things as a symbol of the province. Most lucrative of all was their trade with the western continent of Mundonovo. The people of Coimbra made use of the imports from the far western foreign soil by way of monopoly; ensuring their own profits. They labelled western things as “miracle products” which the aristocracy bought for exorbitant prices. Such wares had included exotic weapons and armour, lanterns of eternal light, and even nostrums for curing any illness. Coimbra initially paid for these things in high quality gold and silver as well as other gems and metals, but later exports began to include paintings, ornaments, and silk. While there was great risk in long distance voyages, vast profits were enjoyed on both sides which resulted in ideal conditions for trade.

Unfortunately, when the first in the line of succession, Grohl Wardka was appointed viceroy of Coimbra, the situation completely reversed. There was religious upheaval on the continent of Mundonovo from which rose a new regime that instated a continental trade embargo, revoking all exchanges with heathens. Those who were caught smuggling were labeled as heretics and punished by a quick death; the unlucky ones were subjected to lengthy executions.

Coimbra still had its treasure until its northern gold mines ran dry. The event had nothing to do with Viceroy Grohl, but for the common man, “Everything is Grohl’s fault. He doesn’t have the blessing of the Sun God,” was a standard explanation.

The effects of the empty mines quickly surfaced. Coimbra's position as the premier trading partner with the southern archipelago was usurped by the easterly province of Ribeldam. When the silk merchants who had once come from the capital via the Bahar province began to take the shortest rout to Ribeldam, it stopped the flow of goods and people, and killed the province's livelihood. Miners who had lost their jobs lined the roads, hesitant of where to go, and the many active merchants of the south simply abandoned their districts to empty, scattered stalls. Those bitten by the lust for gold also vanished, leaving nothing but air in their places. Not even Viceroy Grohl could stand idly by. In order to find new mines he made huge investments, and to combat low employment he offered land to clear for agriculture as well as long term positions in the military.

While such efforts did have some effect, the full economic prowess of the previous golden age was still a long way from recovering. Conversely, the increased military expenditure required higher tax rates which further burdened the people and aggravated rising dissatisfaction. Even their constant, pressing negotiations with the Mundonovo continent remained in vain. Regardless of what Grohl proposed, it fell upon deaf ears. Finally, as insult to injury, an insurrection began in Coimbra's north.

Various complaints had made their way to Emperor Befnam's ears, and in his eyes the prince's inaugural ceremony was on the verge of being canceled. It wasn't just an issue of the leading candidate for the throne suddenly becoming inconsequential, but it also called into question the ability of the ruling emperor, and marred his rule with a negative stigma. It was one thing for him to allow his son a fiefdom out of fatherly affection, it was a different matter, however, if the result of it was a full scale revolt.

"Even blood relatives are to be removed from office should they prove themselves incompetent." Such was the single most important legacy of the first generation Emperor Bergis.

…

"Viceroy, we have just received word that the rebels are advancing south. At this rate, the Rockbell district will be threatened as well. This is an emergency, and we need to devise a plan for our countermeasures."

"……"

Seated on the throne, the Viceroy of Coimbra, Grohl Wardka grasped a chalice of wine in the silence. A vein was bulging on his temple.

"… V-viceroy?"

"Those disloyal little shits! Do they realise how much money was wasted on trying to find them more gold!? What is the northern garrison even doing!?"

The northern regions from which the rebellion had sprung had initially been appropriately garrisoned. There were even stations posted along the highways, so there was no reason for the soldiers not to take action. As the rebels were just passing through without obstruction, it felt like his soldiers were doing nothing to stop them. At that point, it would have been good news if they hadn't joined the rebel forces.

The trusted retainer Wilm addressed his words to Grohl who was red in the face with rage, "Our opponents seem to be indecisive because of their proximity to their families. At present it is difficult to estimate their combat potential."

"For what purpose do they think I pay their wages? Is it not an attempt to deal with the situation?"

"M-my lord, the guards are also former miners."

It would be a best case scenario to say that the guards hadn't joined the rebellion, and just remained as civil servants. While that was certainly the case, simply stating it outright could only serve to further irritate Grohl.

"So what! Shall I bring in the national army now!?"

Throwing some papers to the ground, Grohl rejected the official's words. His blood was boiling to the point where it would be a considerable task to calm him down. Wald was truly shocked, but he kept it from showing on his face by stroking his white beard.

As I thought, this man isn't emperor material. His transparency, and quickness to speak are habits many years beyond repair. It makes me doubt how much of His Majesty Befnam's blood is in him.

"… Viceroy, it is now the time to consider our options for dealing with the rebel army. Shall we commence peaceful negotiations, or is extermination more suitable than

argument? If this isn't swiftly resolved, the seeds of future troubles will have already been sowed."

"Dialogue with the fools who have already drawn their swords is an impossibility!! Muster your troops, we prepare for a subjugation!"

"Wai- please give me but a moment. The soldiers are also the people of Coimbra; ordering them into such a senseless slaughter could only sully your reputation…" before the official could finish his words, Grohl bellowed his rejection.

"Such verbosity! How long does it take for your men to prepare, Wilm!?"

"The subjugation force should be assembled in about two weeks from today. Working overtime could complete the process in only one."

"Then rush the mobilization at once! Listen well, for the fall of Rockbell is unacceptable! That district is my wife's birthplace, and should it be lost, my Sarah's honour will be tarnished!"

"Understood!"

The official rushed out at a brisk pace. Coimbra's standing army numbered approximately 30 000 strong, but the full force would never be concentrated around the capital city of Madress. The northern garrisons were out of the question, so the soldiers had to be gathered from the southern belt. Regardless of Wilm's own pace, the assembling of a punitive force required a full week's time.

"Fuck! That bastard Amil's eyes were mocking me! There's a rebellion now, so I guess I'm the funniest guy in the empire!" Grohl kicked over a nearby stool, and rose with an infuriated expression.

Wilm's cold gaze took in the scene. He had been serving since Grohl was a child, but still held little affection or loyalty towards him. His true loyalty was to the incumbent emperor, and to the furthering of the Horsheido Empire's prosperity.

From Wilm's perspective, placing Grohl on the emperor's throne would be nothing short of a failure. The successor was almost certainly going to be a prince from Bahar by the name of Amil. A rumor was spreading that at the inauguration ceremony, Amil was to take Horsheido as a surname and become the crown prince. There were even

whispers that he was to be adopted by Befnam and soon thereafter enthroned. Wilm found that such stories were not lacking in credibility.

However, Amil's lack of mercy is slightly disconcerting. For example, how thorough he's been in usurping his own older brother's position. It seems he intends to take the first emperor's words to heart.

"Even blood relatives are to be removed from office should they prove themselves incompetent." Amil's rough plan was progressing favourably. Wilm had been in communication with him for some time, so Amil was aware of the full details of the rebellion. Providing arms and funding from behind the scenes, the one who fanned the smouldering coals into flames had been Amil the whole time. He'd even managed to keep hidden that the rebel leader Ristih was in fact a knight from Bahar.

To the nobility of Bahar, it was only natural that the rebel army was composed of mercenaries and Coimbra's northern serfdom. In Wilm's eyes, Grohl was incapable of suppressing the revolt as he had no combat experience, and his leadership skills were lacking; he was paranoid, and quick to show his intentions; and he held great pride in himself, but was severely lacking in charisma.

This subjugation would be hard fought; the rebellion, feeding off the people's hatred, would drag the punitive force into a quagmire. Just as the rebels would be poised to take the entirety of Coimbra, the Bahar guard would sweep in and splendidly depose the agitants. Finally, Grohl would assume full responsibility, and most likely forfeit his position as viceroy. Furthermore, there had been other preparations in order to ease the execution of the plan; it was the reason that Grohl's wife Sarah had been so thoroughly encouraged to visit her home.

Sarah's father, Count Barel, had his fief of Rockbell along the border between northern and southern Coimbra. It was guaranteed to be a centre of conflict when the rebel forces advanced on the south. Knowing this, to ensure Sarah's position on the brink of the revolt, Wilm had proposed that Sarah spend some time with her father. He did not feel a sliver of guilt for leading them into a trap.

"Wilm, do you know if Sarah's party was able to escape to safety? It was your idea that she went there! There's no use denying it!"

Towards the accusatory comment, Wilm knelt with a serious expression.

“I hadn’t anticipated this kind of scenario. At this moment, I am utterly contrite. We are currently unable to contact Lady Sarah. The current plan is to continuously send scouts to confirm her safety. If it comes to it, I will willingly lay down my life to escort her to safety.”

“Whatever you do, be sure you save her! Order Gaddis to advance on Rockbell at once! Give him strict orders to buy time for the main force!”

Coimbra’s military was controlled by the two great generals Wilm and Gaddis. For over fifty years, and since long before Grohl’s appointment, the two soldiers had dutifully served.

“It shall be done.”

“… That infuriating bastard of a rebel army! I don’t even care about the people anymore, I just want the rebels to be entirely eradicated!” Grohl spat in a loud voice after acting as viceroy.

His retreating form was locked in an icy glare.

Only your status and ambitions shall be eradicated. It would be best to pray to the Sun God for the safety of your beloved wife and son. You never would have had the Sun God’s blessing for yourself anyway.

Once Grohl was removed from power, it didn’t matter what became of his Sarah and her son. If they went on to a humble life in a remote location, there would be no need to kill them. The rebel army did, however, plan to leverage Grohl’s wife and child as hostages in order to make him yield.

If he refused to comply, killing him wouldn’t be a problem. That stupid man was guaranteed to try and hurt those who offended him, so he was unlikely to stop before every participant in the rebellion was dead. In that case it would be acceptable to have him legally answer for his crimes as viceroy.

To think that a former child prodigy would be in this state. People are truly a mystery.

At first, Grohl was the most favoured of his siblings. This was demonstrated when he had been granted Coimbra as his fief, and so far, he’d depended on his own childhood fame to maintain his social status. The 5th prince Amil had begun to supplant him. While growing up he had never displayed the signs of genius, but what he did have

was wisdom, and, during his time as viceroy of Bahar, he successfully oversaw the enstatement of many splendid social policies.

As Coimbra was crumbling, he authored Bahar's embetterment. Amil had bought provincial improvements, and secured his position as viceroy through hard work; furthermore, he had managed to steal the place of the leading candidate for succession.

Grohl hated his younger brother Amil with such vehemence that he almost considered them to be at war. It had taken considerable efforts from Wilm to get him to calm down. Mere knowledge of the depths of Grohl's grudge against Amil would have given Emperor Befnam an aneurysm. The plan was to remove Grohl from power, and mop up the situation his rule had spawned.

The day will soon come when my hard work is rewarded. Until then, I must put up with this fool's temper.

Ironically, Wilm was Grohl's most trusted vassal. He'd accompanied him since childhood, and betrayal was simply not considered. Being unable to gauge other people's intentions was Grohl's greatest vice.

…

The Red Circle Army continued to march, each man as he pleased. Neither rank, nor file existed as they marched so that they were hardly worthy of being described as an army. Aside from their splendid banners, nothing served to signify any differences between them and common bandits. Mixed in with the crowd, Noel and the others from the village walked onwards.

"I'm so glad the weather is holding up. The good sun being in high spirits is making my own mood better too."

"That didn't flow well… Look around, the only person with such an optimistic facial expression is you."

With his own face quite stiff, Mirut pointed to his jaw. The men with red cloths wrapped around their arms moved their feet while maintaining a nervous look in their eyes. Their hands held crude spears or bronze swords, and while better than nothing, the only thing protecting their bodies were copper breastplates. They were like lambs, waiting for the regular army to lead them to slaughter; however, they were

numerous. As far as Noel could see they were approximately five-thousand strong, but she was sure that many would flee as soon as battle commenced. While thinking about other people's affairs, Noel turned to look at Fraser and Kraft.

"You two sure are making some deathly expressions. Looking closer, you really look like corpses. Is your circulation okay?"

At Noel's joking, Fraser burned red.

"S-shaddup! Let it be."

"Of course we look like we're about to die. See this? All I have is a hoe. What do they expect me to do with this in battle?"

Kraft looked at the hoe with a pained expression. They were useful enough as farming tools, but weren't things created with the intentions of killing; doing so with them would be unthinkable.

"Well, the long ones have good reach. See, my spear is long too. Come on, look, look!"

She removed the bident from her back, and whirling it around, poked at Kraft, trapping his neck between the prongs. At that rate it seemed she could sever his head in a single stroke.

"Noel, s-stop it with your bad jokes. Uh, um, the tip is touching me!"

"See, the long ones are handy. If you swing that hoe at your opponent's head, it'll definitely do serious damage. Just plow the contents of their skulls, okay."

"Uuuu… somehow, I feel worse."

Even though she had been trying to encourage Kraft, it didn't have much of a calming effect; rather than that, Kraft's face actually became slightly more blue than it had been before. While she tried to think of better ways to comfort him, a ludicrously loud voice was heard from behind.

"Oi you kids! What are you going to do with such a shitty weapon? We aren't here to play around!"

"You're always so loud! What else could I expect from a Baharan?"

“I could say the same about you! Hey brats, I’m talking to you!”

A middle aged man who was growing some stubble, and a fox-eyed slender man approached. A red cloth was wrapped around each of their right arms, and they sported iron armour and steel swords. At a glance they could be appraised as experienced men; they were much more hardened than the people of Zoim.

“W-we are, are we?”

“That’s right. Even though you tried to act tough, things like a shabby hoe, and an old bow aren’t enough are they? And those clothes really won’t do!”

Noel, like the others, checked her own gear. They had leather breastplates, hunting bows, and a farmer’s hoe. The only high quality weapon in their possession was Noel’s bident. Noel had left her bow in the village on account of the awkwardness of transporting arrows in significant quantities. If she needed to kill people, she felt her bident would be more than enough.

“B-but, this is all we had in the village.”

“It’s true though, look closely. This stuff’s shabby. That said, did you really bring a hoe? What do you expect to do with that in battle?”

“You just said that was useful!” though Kraft was dumbfounded, Mirut had retorted quickly.

“I don’t worry about the past.”

“It just happened!”

“Really, was it like that?”

Noel smiled and stuck out her tongue, which cause Mirut to sigh exhaustedly. The middle aged man hadn’t expected the exchange, and burst out laughing.

“What an interesting woman this red haired miss is! So many of the people here walk around with serious faces, I’ve gotten sick of it. Oi, Ned, you think so too right?”

“I said your voice is too loud. Be quieter or it’ll burst my eardrums.”

The man called Ned was covering his ears and shaking his head.

“It’s fine, I’ve lived many years with this! Right, now that the mood is good, I’ll show you something fun! You’d better be thankful to Mr. Geb!”

The stubbly… Geb signaled to a man behind him, who brought something forward. He dumped a large cloth bag before them with a thud.

“Feel free to take your favourite weapons and armour from the lot. The original owner isn’t around to miss them anymore.”

“T-that is…”

To the nervously enquiring Kraft, Geb grinned like a madman.

“That’s right, when we were crushing a village that don’t comply, we got this stuff from a fool who fought back. He was a tottering old geezer, but he still was quite the rascal.”

“He was probably a retired soldier. Well, now that he’s dead it doesn’t matter much,” Ned yawned disinterestedly.

He took a canteen from his belt, and drank in a leisurely manner.

With a serious expression, Mirut took a sword from the bag. Its iron blade had no major flaws.

“Is it alright if I take it?”

“I don’t care. It’s heavy so taking whatever is fine.”

“Thank you very much. Hey, you guys should be grateful too. We don’t know what the future holds.”

“Right!”

At Mirut’s prompting, the others of their village gathered around the sack. Of copper breastplates and iron swords, they chose as they liked. Kraft as well, threw down his hoe in favour of an iron spear. Noel wasn’t particularly interested in any of the items, so she didn’t participate in their rummagings. She didn’t see anything that could become a new treasure after all.

“Oh right, what village did you guys come from?”

“… Z-zoim village.”

“Ah, that run down village we just passed? The following guys probably sacked it. They target the women, and probably everything else. Every place we pass ends up like that.”

While Geb was joking about atrocious things, Mirut averted his gaze. Not a word was said about the other villages. Thinking about earlier words, he figured the villages that opposed were all destroyed, and the ones that complied were forced into a pitiful state. As it was just the way Noel had predicted, they weren’t surprised.

“So~, that is, not many fled separately?”

“Now don’t misunderstand me here, I’m not trying to push any blame onto anybody. It’s just a bit of admiration, that’s all. Even though they were villagers, they would have had to have thought well to realise what would happen. So, somebody told them to evacuate. It can’t have been that old headman?”

Geb asked around the area, but none of the men from the village would meet his eyes. All but one avoided his gaze.

“That was me. I was teaching Mirut.”

“Oh, so it was the miss then. Oi, Ned, you hear this? My discerning eyes were spot on you know.”

“I get it. Tone it down.”

“By the way miss, what was it that made you think of hiding the villagers? Intuition?”

To Geb’s question, Noel smiled and answered honestly, “It wasn’t intuition or even just thinking for a bit. After all, even though the Red Circle Army introduced itself as such, it’s real face is that of a locust. There is only one thing to do when a swarm of locusts comes to feed as it moves from one feeding ground to the next.”

“O-oi, Noel!”

In a panic, Mirut and the other's tried to halt her words, but Noel's mouth wouldn't stop.

"Isn't it strange to think to leave some bait out before they arrive and escape with the rest? So before they were eaten, I was teaching them the proper way to escape."

Saying that, as Noel laughed she jovially patted Geb who was also of good humor, but the trailing Ned's smile vanished.

"The miss's words aren't wrong, and she doesn't seem to shy away from nasty things either, eh? You lot, after this I'll have you properly learn the common sense of this world."

"I, I'm sorry, I'll listen properly when you do."

"And it isn't just taking things by force. You have to agree on who gets what share. That way you can get things in good faith. We're all the same sort, so it's only natural to help eachother out. Am I right?"

"Y-yes."

"As long as you understand. Right, now it's about time we…"

Towards the Geb who was, to everyone's annoyance, just warming up, Noel called out, "Hey, is it alright if I ask a question?"

"What? Well, I'm fine with questions every once in awhile. Don't worry, my wife ran away, so it's okay if you fall for me."

"Pffft, take a look at yourself in a mirror and you'll stop spouting that nonsense."

"I don't need to hear that from you, you rotten fox-eyed bastard!"

Geb and Ned started a shoving match with eachother. Interrupting them, Noel walked over.

"So~, do either of you know how to attain happiness? If you do, I'd appreciate you telling me."

Surprised by her abrupt questioning, Ned and Geb paused to think; however, even though they were seriously considering their responses, they continued to grapple. The other soldiers in the Red Circle Army began to watch them as they continued to march towards their destination.

"… It's a pretty tough question, but my answer is this: whatever it is, win. It's admirable if you win, you get good drinks, and other good things. Money too."

Noel removed her memo from her breast pocket and carefully transcribed Geb's response.

"I see."

"Oi oi, you're writing everything? We sure have found an eccentric one, eh? In that case, be ready to write my answer down too."

"Alright, I'm ready."

"My answer is: be on the winning side. In order to attain the delicacies of life, be smart, and always conduct yourself in such a way as to profit. It's surprisingly difficult, but the rewards are vast."

"Yup, it does seem kind of hard to do."

"What are you trying to teach the kid? With that kind of thinking, how is anybody supposed to get stronger? Real victories are the ones you gain with your own hands."

"It's the truth of the world though. Loud words won't fill your stomach. Even if you do the right thing, it doesn't mean you'll be successful. All you can do is carry yourself well. That's the secret to living well in this world."

After completely recording the pair's thoughts, Noel expressed her thanks, "I appreciate your input. I'll keep this as reference, okay."

"Well, give it your all. Be sure to remember me when you find happiness."

"That goes for me too. My name Ned by the way. Be sure to remember that."

"Yup, I will!"

“Good answer. Well be sure to live and we’ll meet again.”

With toothy smiles, at Noel’s reaction, Ned and Geb laughed as they wandered away. Noel too smiled at the recent developments. Sunny days had the best moods, whereas rainy days had the worst moods. Noel was a girl whose face reflected such a thing.

“As I thought, good things happen on sunny days. I learned two new ways to attain happiness.”

“I’m surprised that you weren’t killed. I swear you’re shortening my lifespan.”

Fraser was wiping a cold sweat.

“It’s been bothering me for a while now, but why are you so intent on finding happiness?” Mirut asked the question that was on his mind.

The quest for happiness was a part of the human experience, yet Noel’s search was extreme to the nth degree.

“That’s because it’s everyone’s dream. Finding happiness was what we all wished for; at least I can find it.”

“Will something special happen when you find happiness?” the question slipped out.

If happiness was ever truly found, of course good things would follow. The problem was that for the moment, what that happiness looked like was a mystery. The thoughts floating in Mirut’s head were focused on how to find food, and the other various ways he could continue a peaceful existence each and every day. He was sorely unaware of that, but what he did know was that his goal was somehow different from Noel’s.

“I won’t know how to find happiness unless I try. I haven’t gotten there just yet though.”

“… Is that so.”

Mirut averted his gaze, even as he spoke. His days had never been happy his entire life, but at the same time, he’d never been resentful of it. It was possible that he had allowed his time of happiness to slip by without ever noticing.

“Well, if you put it that way it might work. Even I never really found much joy in that village…”

Interrupting Fraser, Kraft thrust himself between them, “That’s a lie! Earlier you said you had a belly full of happiness.”

“Be quiet you gangly bastard!”

Fraser landed a direct hit on Kraft’s head. The people of Zoim, tired and nervous, jeered at the staggering boy.

“Ugh, there’s no helping these guys.”

As Mirut was about to get involved, Noel muttered to herself, “But, I do know what happens if I don’t find happiness.”

“… Just what happened to you?”

“Hey, what do you think happens?”

“You were about to say. Hurry up and explain.”

“Ha, if Mirut can’t find happiness, I know what will happen. It would definitely be best if you found happiness,” smiling mischievously, Noel stood and began to walk alone.

Noel laughed brightly, but the look in her eyes seemed somehow hollow to Mirut. It reminded him of the emptiness of a soulless doll; artificial, with neither hope nor despair.

…

Geb and Ned had departed from Noel’s group and returned to Ristih.

“Where were you loitering? Your ranks are lower than mine in this Red Circle Army! Have some awareness of your commanding officer!”

“Understood, Captain Ristih. Please continue. Ned foolishly wandered off without listening to me.”

“Apologies, Captain. Even though it was entirely this idiot’s fault.”

Geb and Ned bowed without grace, as Ristih nervously rebuked them under his breath, "… Refer to me as Sir Ristih, this isn't Bahar. It'll be a serious problem if we're noticed by the people of Coimbra before the operation is complete."

"Okay, okay, I get it."

"This guy's always too loud, so you probably should have said that earlier. I tried telling him, but he wouldn't listen," Ned's words caused Ristih to furrow his brow.

"Seriously, have you adopted the laxness of the peasants surrounding you? Don't just befriend the plebeians for fun!"

"My behavior is usually appropriate. In battle I'll do my best, but I don't know how well they'll do."

"I don't think any of the stupid rebels will figure it out. I'm just saying this, but are they even prepared for battle?"

Ristih was slightly shocked. His life was dependant on the rebellion. If the decision was made for suppression, it would become a war. He'd been half forced into his role, and didn't seem to have made such an extreme resolution. The situation had made it nigh impossible for Ristih to ever fulfill his ambitions.

"It'll be fine, the lot's bound to shape up once they've seen a bit of blood. Once they've plundered once, there's no going back. He he he, just leave the Rockbell district to me."

"… Is it truly best to destroy Rockbell after all?"

"Of course. There are plenty of excuses for wiping the place out. We'll have to get the recruits used to the blood and greed eventually. Besides, it'll be more fun this way."

Geb sprouted an evil grin. He could easily be mistaken for a brigand, and even the thought that he was one of Bahar's knights would have surprised people. Ned nodded beside him. Although originally from Coimbra, he was a man who had left for Bahar in dissatisfaction. The sacking would defile his hometown, but he didn't seem to have any complaints. Ristih, as the leader, had to consider both destroying the target, and having it surrender because the goal was not a war of conquest.

"Are you out of suggestions on how to get the local lord to capitulate? If Viceroy Grohl's wife and child are captured, we won't need to waste our efforts."

“I don’t think he’ll hand them over like a present to a daughter. Besides, if you try something that slow, it’ll give time for the real army to come out of southern Coimbra, which would make the toppling of Rockbell all the more difficult. Now is the time to take it all in one stroke.”

They had done well in fanning the flames of rebellion in the hearts of the people, but they were still not of the strength required to take the capital city. The full force of the provincial guard was 30 000 well trained and equipped professional soldiers, whereas the rebels only had a disorganised rabble around five thousand strong. There was no way they could confront their opponent directly if they were facing its full force; however, Grohl was famous for being inefficient, and the Coimbra divisions were also the worst in the empire. If Ristih could beat back the punitive force, there was a chance he could favourably negotiate for the capital’s surrender. It was for that goal that ‘ad urbem vinco’ became their mantra.

The plan was to lengthen the rebellion to give Bahar an excuse for military intervention, but that wasn’t the main issue. To defeat Falid, and deliver it into Amil’s hands, complaints needed to be raised, and great deeds needed to be done. Ristih was confident he could do it.

“All right, at this rate we’ll invade Rockbell, and seize victory in one fell swoop. Though I do pity the residents.”

“Entrust the vanguard to me. Starting with that district, I’ll show you an easy victory. He he, exciting, eh?”

Rockbell’s guards were few, and their spies were well established there. It would surely fall, and reinforcements wouldn’t be able to arrive in time.

“Sir Ristih, if you could spare them, I would appreciate you lending me a hundred men.”

“Oi oi, what’s this Ned? I thought you didn’t want to play around?”

“They are to be saved for later, for something much more fun than short term pillaging. If I do have them, I might achieve the greatest feat of the campaign,” Ned pronounced with a satisfied air.

Geb acknowledged his statement without believing it while taking a sip of water from his canteen.

“What exactly are you planning, Ned? There’s no issue with allowing you only one hundred men. They’re all rank and file, are you sure you can rely on so few?”

“I’m originally from Coimbra, so I know its geography well. In the wooded groves stretching west of Rockbell there’s an abandoned fort that will prove useful when the fighting begins. I thought we might be able to conceal a significant body of troops there.”

Ristih nodded while rubbing his chin.

“… I see, you thought this through quite well; will only a hundred men be enough?”

“The fort has the appearance of a ruin, so even some ten-odd men would be enough. If we take too many and are spotted, there’d be no meaning to it all. One hundred men will be perfect.”

With his fox-eyes locked on Ristih, Ned twisted his mouth into a grin. His whole body seemed convinced of his plan.

“Right, in that case, your column is in charge of securing that fort. Take some of our Baharan soldiers. The operation will give us more options if Grohl’s wife and child are hidden. If you ever need reinforcements, immediately send word.”

“Yes sir. Please leave it to me.”

“Geb, you take the vanguard to besiege Rockbell. When the defence is low, flood them with your reserves!”

“He he, roger that!”

Eyes locked on the pair, Ristih stood, raising his voice, “We, the Army of the Red Circle, march now on Rockbell! We march to crush the defenders of the capital, our final goal! So that Viceroy Grohl can know of our intentions, to the world in which our target lies, we must rouse ourselves now more than ever!”

Blending in with the crowd, the soldiers from Bahar raised their arms with the rest of the men.

Author's Note:

The continent is the continent of Libelika. The continent of Mondonovo is in the west, and the furthest south are the southern islands. The Coimbra province is in the south-western area of the continent of Libelika. Imagine Nagasaki.

Translator's Note:

The below note is the same as before, but at least I liked the content.

Nagasaki was Japan's primary trading centre with the Portuguese and Chinese although most of the similarities in this work are with the Portuguese. Initially the ports brought great prosperity due to the trade, but Christianity was also one of the imports. Later when Toyotomi Hideyoshi feared that the Spanish were working with the Catholic church to attempt an invasion of Japan (due to some poor negotiating tactics on the Spanish side of things), after some killings (with the Japanese doing most of the killing), there was a ban of foreign trade which lasted some time into the Tokugawa era too, but was eventually lifted. Catholicism was also banned at the time, and many of the "big name" samurai lords renounced their faith. Some of them didn't, however, and were (maybe incidentally, unless the whole thing was a conspiracy) sent to invade Korea, but that is mostly unrelated, and happened during Hideyoshi's reign.

The author was significantly influenced by other aspects of Japanese history as well. Some of the parallels I was able to draw, though I admit to potentially overthinking things a bit, include:

- Rice tax
- Rebelling against the government while claiming ultimate loyalty to the emperor
- A warrior class (country in the case of this novel) being ostracized by the more cultured courtiers in the south, and eventually taking over
- A continent to the west and islands to the south

- Old forts laying about (in Japan that would be the forts they built when they first feared a mongol invasion)

- A flag with a sun emblem

- The sun looks red in the minds of the people (I wouldn't expect 'the land of the rising sun' to depict many yellow midday suns instead of the red ones that are its namesake, but as far as I know, neither Horsheido nor Noel have any reason to think of the sun in any colour other than its usual yellow aside from their author being from 日本)

I think I learned the above from: *A Brief History of the Samurai,* by Johnathan Clements; Japanese Imperialism 1894-1945, by W.G. Beasley; and looking at the sky. Please don't expect me to be an expert. If you are interested in learning more about any of the things I mentioned above, please research away. Honestly, I'd be impressed if anybody read this far into a translator's note.

…

I used "ad urbem vinco" instead of " so the capital surrenders" because I think Latin is a good way of making slogans that don't sound cheesy.

Chapter 4
To Kill a Lying Fox

Noel and the others were admitted into the newly formed flying column, and they began their march towards the old abandoned fort with the fox-eyed Ned as their commanding officer. His mouth in a smile, he cheerfully advanced. The young ones who were following him had to fight the weight of their weapons and armour which they had yet to grow accustomed to carrying. Even keeping up with Ned was a struggle for them. Their destination was at the heart of the forest, and there was a constant need to watch their footing due to the uneven terrain as they made their way through the trees with their vision obscured by the foliage. All of their strength went into continuing the march.

After taking a deep breath, Mirut wiped his sweat. Although he was used to rushing through the mountains every day, his feet were beginning to hurt. He too was new to the heavy equipment, but Noel on the other hand, was lazily matching the commander's pace whilst yawning and stretching in a relaxed manner.

"… Oi, you. What's up with your energy even though you're a woman? Isn't this all kinds of strange?" Mirut asked between breaths.

His ragged voice sounded like he wanted to stop and rest.

"This much isn't an issue. I don't think you guys exercise enough…"

"No, you are definitely the weird one here. Just look around and see."

The few who had maintained their composure were Ned, five soldiers, and Noel. The rest all had the faces of dead men, and appeared likely to collapse at any moment; their fatigue was unmistakable.

"The simple folk are the ones worn out here. Captain Ned, and the few surrounding him, seem like they're used to it already. It's like they are military."

Although the statement elicited many nods, it didn't account for Noel. She wasn't soldierly from any angle at all; she was just a girl who casually defied common sense.

“That may be so, but it doesn’t give you guys any excuses.”

“Uh, well, in my case it’s because I’m special I guess. When Mr. Sun is shining, I’m always full of energy,” Noel flashed her teeth as she smiled.

It wasn’t an unexpected answer at that point, and Mirut sighed while shaking his head.

“Ah, I see now. I get tired whenever you speak.”

“It must be hard for you.”

“It’s your fault!”

“Oh, by the way, do you know where Fraser and Kraft are? I haven’t seen them in a while.”

“Yeah, that? They’re with the main force advancing on Rockbell. It sounded like they’d be in the first waves. That idiot Fraser just dragged Kraft along with him to the front.”

Kraft had been opposed to fighting, but was swept along by Fraser’s hot blooded enthusiasm. He had basically become Fraser’s henchman, and it seemed he had yet to rebel. Apparently he had heard good things about the upcoming campaign from Geb, and now that he was on the side that pillaged, his ambitions had flared to the point that Kraft had even begun to imitate him. They made the vanguard their goal. Mirut had tried to keep them in check, but Fraser heard none of it. The rest of the Zoim fellows had gravitated towards the flying column.

“I see. I guess it just can’t be helped.”

“What can’t be helped?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“What is it? I’m just more curious now,” although he glared at her, Noel had already been distracted by something else.

“Ah, could it be? Is it that mossy, overgrown building there? It gives me that kind of feeling you know,” Noel pointed in the direction she was looking.

In a small clearing was a moss covered stone fort. The massive walls which retained their dignity despite their age were crumbling on all sides. It felt they could be breached in the blink of an eye.

Exactly what they were going to do with the place, Mirut and the others had not yet discerned.

“You wait here. We’ll survey the situation. I want absolute silence, okay?”

Ned spoke in a voice that could kill, and five men lay down to approach the fort. Wary of their surroundings, their eyes surveyed the area. They swept through the ruins and the surrounding clearing thoroughly.

“Exactly what‘s happening right now? Somehow, something amazing must be hidden here.”

“In this rundown, crumbled place?”

“As I said, there has to be something we came here to find.”

“I guess so.”

“I wouldn’t hide here though. After all, it seems like the kind of place that’s easily found, but not fled from,” Noel explained herself while absentmindedly approaching a tree.

It was in an inconspicuous location, and appeared to be able to comfortably conceal them, but the inspection of its interior was taking longer than anticipated.

“Then where would you hide?”

“Hmm, I guess I’d maybe hide in a hole or something.”

“What, are we ants or moles now? They don’t even hide for long.”

“There are all kinds of different holes you know. I just don’t want to hide in any more graves.”

Her own words called up unpleasant images, and for an instant, she found herself in a familiar downpour. Although someone had responded to her, Noel’s eyes were

closed, and she no longer had the will to continue the conversation. Hearing that, Mirut stopped, and stooped down to recover some stamina. The others too, finished up their conversations and averted their eyes. While they remained that way, Ned's group finally returned.

"Alright, everyone listen up. As we face off against the Rockbell district, I might as well reveal the true reason that we came to this filthy place," after a dramatic pause Ned's face sprouted a grin before he continued, "We only have one aim: to capture Grohl's wife and child when they attempt to flee from Rockbell. If we succeed in this mission, the chances of achieving victory will increase dramatically. We'll be holding his family hostage after all."

"B-but, will we really find them here? All I can see are ruins," one young man timidly enquired, and Ned nodded with confidence.

"Even I was slightly worried before we got here, but what of it? After meticulous searching, we've found traces that this place has recently been used."

"I-I see?"

"Oi, what kind of answer did you want? Now is the critical moment; our hands can grasp the target. The rewards will be great, and you'll feel a lightness in your chests if we succeed. As there will be resistance, if you don't fight hard, you'll die quickly."

"U-understood."

"Don't be scared, lighten up. You have to psyche yourself up before a fight."

Ned slapped the boy on the back, and then, after looking over the others, coldly explained, "We are to capture the woman and child without killing them; however, should they resist, incapacitating them forcefully isn't a problem. We kill the rest of their party. Now is not the time to hesitate due to fear."

"S-so we are expected to kill?"

"Kill or be killed. Either way, I don't care. Just know I won't retrieve your corpse."

As Ned made himself clear, the youths stiffly nodded.

“Scour this fort with a fine toothed comb! Leave no stone unturned. Search the basements, and the rooftops. Be sure to call out if you find anything. I’ll be waiting near the entrance in case they try to escape… oi, are you even listening? Hey, the miss over there, I’m referring to you.”

“Yup, I’m listening. I’ll search really hard you know.”

Noel, at least try respond appropriately for once, or so Mirut thought, but Ned didn’t seem to mind.

“One of us today will be the one to capture targets. I’ll make a full report, so expect rewards. Speak up if you understand!”

Ned had called out in a loud voice to intimidate any hiding inside the fort. The others too, spoke up loudly.

“Understood!”

“Then here we go! Take the fort, and capture Grohl’s wife and child! FLUSH THEM OUT!!”

Ned drew his sword, and advanced on the fort. Shortly thereafter, Mirut and the rest began a charge as well. Noel too, readied her weapon, but she cautiously advanced in the rear of the formation. Unconsciously glancing at the sky, she noticed that although clouds were present, the sun was in good health. Having confirmed this, Noel hastened her pace.

…

In the rotted fort —Sebtem fort— the trapped young knight Cynthia Edrich was greatly troubled. Cynthia’s mission was to escort the Viceroy Grohl’s wife and son, Sarah and Elgar, while they visited Rockbell. The timing had proven poor as during the visit, an uprising took root in the north of the province. The rebel army was gaining considerable strength, and eventually would aim to take the capital city of Madress. En route, the rebels would be forced to pass through Rockbell. For Cynthia, that news meant it was time to immediately return her charges to the capital, but Count Barel had rejected her proposal.

Although his will to protect his daughter was strong, what overpowered it was the fear that he would fail at his task. Barel himself would never admit to such a thing, but

Cynthia was sure she had figured him out. The compromise she proposed was that, rather than remaining in the district that was sure to become a battlefield, they would instead take refuge in the old Sebtem fort. With that as the plan, Barel had reluctantly agreed, and so, before fleeing to the capital, the arrangements had been made to hide. It had only been done because Cynthia had so strongly pushed for it. They were supposed to lay low and meet up with the regular army when they came to drive out the rebels.

There were no problems before now. I never thought the rebels would have someone who knew of this spot!

It had been struck from the maps; however, there were many locals who knew of the old Sebtem fort. There should have been no way the rebels who advanced from the north could know of it.

Yet, how?

Already, men with red cloths wrapped around their right arms had broken down the gates and were entering the fort. Cynthia's guard was only 20 strong whereas the approaching rebels numbered about one hundred. Normally, they wouldn't lose to such rabble, but they were disadvantaged by the necessity of protecting a woman and child. It would be difficult to keep the two out of harm's way. They bore the name of Wardka so if they were to be captured, the rebel's morale would regrettably skyrocket.

They are probably after Lady Sarah and Master Elgar, but their timing is too good… Unless they have spies on the inside.

Many ideas spiraled through her mind, but there wasn't enough time to calmly consider them. She decided to quietly escape through the hidden tunnel in the storehouse rather than to fight, and so that she could ensure the wife and son escaped, she would stay behind as a distraction. Old rags had been posted on the wall nearest the door to the storehouse which, although primitive, could serve to disguise the entrance. It probably wouldn't deceive anyone for long, but it had the possibility of buying some time due to the darkness of the storeroom's interior.

"Knight Cynthia, as I feared, the door has rusted and cannot be opened!"

"We'll use the war hammer! Quickly, or they'll catch up!"

“U-understood!”

“Wrap it in the cloth so the sound is dampened! Hurry!”

“Sir!”

Cynthia angrily reprimanded the soldiers. Pressed against eachother, Sarah and Elgar’s faces became blue. She wanted to tell them that they would be fine, but couldn’t bring herself to utter such irresponsible words.

The soldiers readied the cloths, and swung the hammer. A dull thud reverberated through the storeroom. They scowled at the sound that was much louder than anticipated, but were unable to do anything about it. All they could do was pray that no enemies were coming to investigate. They held their breath and gripped their weapons. A foul stench assailed their noses. They attempted to check for pursuers through a rounded hole in the door through which they had entered, but as it was so dark the situation could not be accurately assessed. The room beyond the door was largely similar to the one they were in, but there should have been light filtering in from the upper stories. They had recently been able to comfortably peek out so the current situation was supposed to be an impossibility.

“… What? Who cut out the lights?”

“Would this help?”

“Thanks.”

With a torch lit, and held up to the peephole they once more surveyed the other room.

“Gh…!”

Cynthia let out a small cry as she leapt away from what she thought was the door. They had gravely mistaken the reason behind the sudden darkness. It was a human eye. From the time they had entered, Cynthia had been directly in front of the door, so its owner couldn’t have properly spotted the others. It was but a small spot on the door that had remained uncovered by the cloth they had hung. The two enemies had been face to face, only separated by a thin door. It was an encounter that sent shivers down Cynthia’s spine. If she hadn’t been on guard, she would have undoubtedly screamed. Though her goosebumps told her to flee, she knew her situation.

“Knight Cynthia, whatever has happened?”

“T-there, there’s somebody out there!”

“Ah ha ha, I~ found you.”

From the room beyond, a young woman’s voice could be heard, and was followed up by the sound of repeated strikes to the door. Those inside knew they had undoubtedly been found. Although the door was wooden, it’s construction was solid, and it probably wouldn’t break easily; however, the situation was proceeding unfavourably. The blows were gradually becoming heavier with time, so that the impacts began to shake the very air.

What should I do? At this rate, they’ll call for help. I’m going to have to sally forth.

As Cynthia made her choice, she turned to the nervous soldiers and issued her orders, “This enemy is mine! The rest of you escape with Lady Sarah and the prince! Whatever happens when I head out there, do not open the door!”

“B-but…”

“I will go too!”

“Unacceptable, do not forget our duty! Listen up, I’m going to shut that door! Do not worry about me, just hurry and escape!”

Grasping her sword, she forced open the heavy door. The person before her eyes backed away after making a surprised noise. With the time that bought her, Cynthia slammed the door shut, and confirmed the sound of it locking behind her. Her subordinates had followed their orders. Cautiously, she observed her opponent. She could only see a young woman. Her blood red hair was surprisingly lustrous.

So young. She’s probably only in her mid teens, but I can’t overlook a traitor who joined the rebellion!

She’d hesitated at the thought of killing a child, but quickly resolved herself to her task.

“Are you the only one here?”

“Yup. I’m the only one who’s found you.”

“I see. How did you know?”

“Well, on that wall there, a cloth was blocking the gaps. If you look hard enough, it’s pretty obvious that something is hidden there you know.”

Cynthia quickly glanced over her shoulder to check. Certainly, there was a cloth blocking the gaps in a door that looked fortified; however, it would be difficult to spot at a distance with the current light levels. The girl before her must have been quite perceptive to notice. That her gift may have brought about her own death was a tragedy Cynthia could hardly express.

“Are you with the rebel army?”

“Yup, basically. Also, it isn’t just a swarm of locusts, it’s called the Red Circle Army. At least it has a good name, eh?”

The red haired girl nodded while carelessly smiling. She was armed with a long bident, she wore a leather cuirass, and a red cloth was wrapped around her arm. There was no doubt of her affiliation once she had stated the rebel army’s name. Cynthia reaffirmed herself once more.

Sadly, she must die. I can’t afford to overlook anyone right now.

To create a false sense of security she decided to ask her name. It would probably be her final conversation.

“My name is Cynthia. May I hear yours?”

“Sure, I guess. They call me Noel…”

As she unguardedly spoke, Cynthia launched a swipe at Noel’s throat. She aimed for the throat of the girl who had not yet prepared for a fight. It was hardly the honourable behavior of the knightly caste, but for the moment Grohl’s wife and son were the priority. Furthermore her opponent was a traitor; there was no need for honour. Putting power into her left leg, with both hands she brought down a diagonal swing from the right with all of her force. She felt her blade flex as a shrill metallic clank could be heard in the room.

“Suddenly attacking isn’t very fair.”

“Y-you caught the blade!?”

The two prongs of Noel’s bident had magnificently trapped her opponent’s sword. The shock of the impact numbed Cynthia’s hands. Noel’s face went from carefree to vicious in an instant. Her bloodlust was palpable. Cynthia had never experienced this before in any of her previous battles.

T-this one isn’t a regular insurgent!?

So she wouldn’t lose her cool, she endured.

“It feels like I won’t get my hands on the treasure in there unless I defeat you I guess. So, I’ll fight with full force okay?”

“Silence, vile traitor! Receive this sword as judgement!”

Instead of a proper reply, she again slashed at her opponent. She was confidant her physique was superior, and so she planned on victory by overpowering the other. The rebel had a bident which gave her an advantage in reach. With that in mind, Cynthia decided to abandon defence, and quickly dispatch her foe from up close.

“Die!”

“Woah, pretty speedy, aren’t you.”

She warded off the swipe at her chest with the shaft of her bident. Utilising her momentum, Noel attempted to strike Cynthia with the butt of her bident, but she avoided the blow by jumping back. To think her swordsmanship would lose to a spearman, Cynthia’s blood rushed to her head.

“You, insolent little…”

“Hey, you’re breathing pretty heavily over there, are you sure you’re okay? Should we take a break?”

“Don’t make fun of me!”

“I wasn’t though.”

Noel had been on the defensive and had yet to seriously attack. With tip and haft she'd batted aside blows, and her footwork had lightly maintained an advantageous range. Cynthia had been easily evaded; over time her strikes became erratic, and her movements dulled.

"Huaaaa!"

"Ah…"

It seemed the easy target was an illusion. Noel would leave intentional openings, and dodge skillfully when they were lashed out at. After a feint, she quickly thrust with her eyes locked on Noel's lower abdomen. Regrettably, the blade only grazed her right side, and in a counter attack, Noel landed a kick squarely on Cynthia's stomach. The blow carried considerably more force than what had been initially received.

"Ghh…"

It was as though the hit had pierced through her entirely, and her voice was probably let out due to the pain. Her armour had done nothing to help, and gastric juices had been forced out of her stomach and out her mouth. Her knees trembled in pain, and her posture was broken by a strike from the butt of Noel's bident. While trying to get up, Cynthia found the tip of the bident thrust before her face. The two prongs halted just before gouging out her eyes. Cynthia's movements stopped, and she gasped in surprise. With only a slight move, her life could have been ended.

"Move and you die. I probably shouldn't kill a woman, but I will. So, please obediently drop your sword okay?"

"I, I refuse! I cannot sully the honour of Coimbra's knights at the hands of an insurgent!"

There wasn't much she could do, but she wouldn't comply. A knight could never dishonour herself at the words of a mere rebel. At her spirited refusal, Noel made a difficult expression.

"No matter what?"

"Of course! Just do it already! I sacrifice myself for Coimbra!"

“Ha~h, what a pain. Since it’s bothersome, I might not kill you after all. If no one finds you, it shouldn’t be a problem,” Noel winked and inclined her head.

Pausing for a moment, she made her decision and, with a sharp gaze, put power into her arms.

“Didn’t I tell you not to move? Lie still if you don’t want your limbs broken. I’m only going to leave you half dead.”

“Gh…”

“For the moment, that sword is bothersome, so drop it okay? I’d hate to accidentally skewer you after all.”

Cynthia wondered if she was about to twirl the bident, but instead found her sword struck from her hand. It was so fast that she had not even been able to react. As one final act of defiance, she unsheathed the dirk from behind her, but her right hand was swiftly knocked aside.

“H-how shameful it is! To be undone by a rebel, nay by a young woman!” Cynthia admitted defeat after fighting as hard as she could.

“These kinds of days do happen. It’d be nice if you win your next fight…”

“You fucking bastard! Don’t make fun of me!

From where she had risen to in her anger, Cynthia could see a young man had descended from the upper floors.

“Oi… I heard some intense shouts from here, what’s happening. Wait, what did you do!?”

“Mirut! Good timing. Can you help me with this? I found this woman named Cynthia though…”

“Wha- seriously!? No way, did you capture her after a fight?”

Mirut cautiously approached.

“I already won, see. Now come and help me.”

“A-alright.”

“You brought a longish rope right?”

“Ah, but it’s not on hand right now. Should I grab the guy who took it?”

“Okay, just tie her hands behind her with the red cloth. It’s better than nothing.”

“True.”

“Unhand me traitor! Keep your filthy hands off of me!”

Cynthia began to resist, but his sword quickly jabbed at her, and she realised it was futile. Mirut tied her arms behind her back. All she could do was pray that those inside had escaped to safety.

“Shit…”

“We’re done then eh?”

“By the way, did you really defeat this knight woman? She is a knight right?”

“Yeah, basically.”

“…. What’s up with that? If she surrendered to you, are knights surprisingly not that big of a deal?” Saying that, the young Mirut rudely looked down at Cynthia.

He didn’t want to say that an amateur like Noel had defeated her, and so he gazed at her amazedly. Cynthia’s face flushed red in anger and embarrassment.

“She was pretty good, so you’d probably have died Mirut; in two halves with one blow. Or maybe your throat would have been cleanly slit, I don’t know.”

“S-shut up… Just because I’ve never really used a sword doesn’t mean…”

Stuttering, Mirut’s voice began, but suddenly, he felt goosebumps running down his spine.

“Stop that! More importantly, there’s a kid in here somewhere right? Wait, was the woman’s name Sarah? I can’t recall…”

“Something looks hidden behind this door. It’ll be pretty hard to break down, so let’s just call Captain Ned over.”

“Right, I’ll get him. You stay and watch the knight woman.”

“Keep this a secret from the others or it’s no good. We found her after all. If more people gather, the reward will diminish you know.”

“I know.”

“Then, we’re working together. That’s right, I’ll share with everyone from Zoim so it’ll be all good. Monopolies are bad right?”

“What kind words,” scoffed Mirut with a wry smile as he ascended the staircase, leaving Noel and Cynthia behind.

“Be that as it may, this place is pretty dingy. It reeks of mould, and I can’t even see the sun’s rays down here,” Noel tucked her bident under her arm and plopped down next to Cynthia.

“…”

“…”

“… Um…” Noel raised her voice, unable to stomach the silence.

Cynthia had her eyes closed, and was permeated with stillness.

“Hey Cynthia, as a knight, you’re pretty strong, eh? Like when you almost ran me through, that was pretty dangerous.”

“…”

“Hey, hey, is it okay if I ask you something?”

“…”

“Ehe, I guess it’s no good after all. I guess there’s no helping it then.”

Noel laughed remorsefully, and leaned against the wall.

“This way, Captain Ned.”

After a while, Mirut had finally returned, and he dragged with him, three men. The fox-eyed Ned was scratching his black hair as though it was a bother.

“Yo, miss. It seems you defeated this knight woman, eh? That’s quite the achievement.”

“It seems her name is Cynthia. She came from in there,” as she explained, Noel pointed to the door which had the ragged cloths hung behind it.

Ned nodded to his two subordinates and gestured them to destroy the door.

“All right, we don’t need to be subtle, just break it down. There’s probably nobody in there anymore, but maintain caution.”

“Sir!”

The subordinates took out a steel hammer they had prepared and began to batter the door. Hearing the conversation, Cynthia’s face twisted into a scowl.

How could they know that no one’s inside?

“Actually, I’ve been quiet about this up until now, but this fort has a hidden escape tunnel. Knowing that, I sent you guys in here to flush the rats out. My men are already posted at the tunnel’s exit you know. The appearance of total troop commitment to the search was simply an illusion.”

Ned had taken a few aside after giving the order to charge, and snuck them around to the tunnel’s exit. Only around half of the flying wing had actually been searching the fort. Obviously, they hadn’t informed Noel of this either.

“How did you bastards learn of the tunnel!?”

“He, how do you think? Isn’t it mysterious? Well, I guess you could call it a revelation from the Sun God.”

Ned sneered at her. Cynthia, seeing his expression, finally realised how they had known. She herself had seen the man before. His hair had changed from brown to black, but there was no mistaking his identity.

“Wait, so we don’t get a reward?”

“The viceroy’s wife and son are my gift to the men. The true victor here is obviously this Ned. Well, I’ll be sure to treat you all to a meal some time.”

“Unfair,” Noel’s words were sharp.

“That’s right, adults are unfair. He he, now that you’ve seen the world’s true colours you’ve gotten sulky, eh?” He patted Noel’s head as he made fun of her.

The sound of splintering wood cracked through the air. The door connecting the two spaces was finally beginning to falter.

“Captain Ned, as expected, there’s no one inside!”

“We’ve located the entrance to the tunnel. They must’ve escaped through here!”

“Good work men. No need to chase them. They may have prepared an ambush after all. Now, shall we dispose of this woman and meet up with the rest? They may be having some trouble.”

After yawning some, he placed his hand his sword.

“Nedicas?”

“Eh?”

“You bastard! You’re the Nedicas who served in the Coimbra guard! With those fox-eyes, and lowborn grin, even with a different hair colour, it is as clear as day!”

“And who are you exactly?” Ned spouted angrily, but Cynthia continued without pause.

“Three years ago, my party was sent to hunt you for escaping with military funds! You ended up fleeing for Bahar!”

In a few steps he had run to the adjacent Bahar with his ill gotten gains. As there were political barriers to entering Bahar, they had to request permission from Great General Wilm. They had requested entrance; however, they were denied. There was

even a rumor that Nedicas had joined the Baharan military. With the cold relations between the two provinces such a thing was not improbable.

“Oh, whatever this is, I don’t understand. You seem to have mistaken me for someone else.”

“Silence! Embezzling funds from a position of authority is inexcusable! Why are you even in the rebellion you git!? You wouldn’t follow a man acting as the voice of the plebeians!!”

With a profoundly disingenuous sigh, Ned had covered his eyes with his hand. For Noel, and Mirut who were watching it all, they didn’t understand.

“Captain, what do we do?”

“What do you mean ‘what do we do’?”

“Well, she’s been talking too much…?”

“We were going to kill her anyway, so don’t worry about it. Not that it would hurt to shut her up a bit early.”

At the subordinate-like man’s words, Cynthia raised her eyes. His accent felt familiar somehow. She realised he had a Bahar accent, his words were pronounced at a different cadence than those of a native to Coimbra.

“You bastards have Bahar accents… Wait, why are Baharans fighting in Coimbra’s rebellion!?”

Even as she spoke, the pieces began to fit together in her head.

“Er, no, I’m not a Baharan. You’re totally mistaken, right Captain?”

“This idiot. He’s shaking so much it practically confirms her story.”

Seeing the man, Ned disappointedly shook his head. The situation was taking an unfortunate turn, and Cynthia’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“No way…”

“Oi oi, can you seriously stop it with that. I have no guilt on my conscience, so why do you want these forced conscripts over here to get involved?”

Although he threatened her with a sword, her words continued to gush forth.

“Is the rebellion backed by the Bahar military? Were the initial agitants to stir up the people Baharans!?”

“Ah~, you had to say it.”

“D-do you cowards know no shame!?”

Cynthia bared her teeth as she shouted. Her magnificent blond hair seemed to stand on end in pure hatred.

“Shut up, stupid woman!”

“Gua!”

Kicked in the face, she fell to the floor, dispersing the dust which had accumulated on the stone. Blood ran down her face, but she paid it no mind. She already knew the truth, and to the bitter end she would fight; in death she would not die.

The information needed to be conveyed to Viceroy Grohl. It was no mere rebellion, but a grand conspiracy.

“Do you realise that your careless words have added two more corpses to the pile? You really are beyond help.”

At Ned’s signal, two of his subordinates drew their swords and approached Mirut and Noel causing the former to turn blue.

“Eh, w-why? Aren’t we on the same side?”

“I’m sorry Noel, and… was it Mirut? This fool said too much, so we have no choice but to kill you. Curse the ones who cursed you.”

“Why!? I don’t even understand what this is all about, and I definitely won’t speak of it!”

“We just can’t have people noticing. Rumors will spread and grow with time. You wouldn’t even need proof to start people doubting the cause, all that would matter is whether or not they’d believe you. You understand that the Red Circle Army is a mishmash of all kinds of people, and we can’t risk it collapsing right?”

“So you kill us. Adults really are unfair, eh?” Noel expressionlessly retorted; unlike Mirut, she did not speak for fear of death.

“Pretty much. I don’t like that this is how your reward turned out. I will make proper graves for you two, so try to forgive me.”

“W-wait!”

“I’m not making you a grave. I’ll torment, and torment, and torment you, until you finally die in eight separate pieces. You made me kill two innocent children, so expect a punishment.”

Ned spat, and gave the order. Naked blades glistened in the darkness. A red rain of blood splashed. A smell quickly filled the air, and the stone floor grew puddles of a rusty red.

“I almost fell asleep during your speech you know.”

“Eh?”

“Hey, are you okay Mirut? Your eyes are spinning…”

“A-am I safe?”

“You’re safe as far as safeness is concerned, but these guys lost their necks. Look, see?”

“UHYAAA!!”

Confirming the horrific scene, Mirut released a strange voice and fell backwards.

“That was an interesting sound. Hey, where did that even come from?” Noel comfortably enquired.

As Cynthia had just regained consciousness, she couldn’t immediately understand the situation. Noel had brandished her weapon as the men drew their swords, and

decapitated them in a single stroke. There were only two in the room who had yet to bleed.

“This isn’t a situation to laugh at jokes…”

“I guess so. It’ll be hard, but I guess it can’t be helped.”

“Who could have known there would be such a monster here? Don’t even think about coming over. Don’t come close. This is the worst!”

“I’m not a monster, I’m Noel. Isn’t it a good name?”

“I hate it. You’re a monster we never anticipated; suddenly, and without warning, there is a beast that strikes out at helpless sheep. I don’t know what created you, but this must be fate’s game. These rules are seriously the worst.”

Ned thrust his left hand before him, closing in on Noel surprisingly fast. He was probably throwing something in a desperate attack. Waiting for Ned’s inevitable charge was a merciless attack. She threw her bident. Cutting through the air, it pierced his armour, torso, and spine.

“Gh…”

Groaning, and with his entrails scattered, Ned was pinned to the wall. His lower half tore off. At seeing his own wretched state, his fox-eyes held great despair. For better or worse, he hadn’t been killed instantly. Noel started to hum cheerfully as she walked away. Her path was straight over her defeated opponents’ viscera. The sound of splashing and bouncing haunted the ears of Mirut and Cynthia.

“I-it ne-never came. M-my achievements, even though… I could finally… grasp…” Ned slurred in a weakening voice.

Such a thing was not supposed to happen. He could have never anticipated seeking asylum and fame in Bahar could lead to this.

“You won’t find happiness just by being on the winning side, eh?”

“I… used my… head, but… it didn’t work… out, eh?”

“Does this mean Geb’s ‘always win’ is out too?”

“W-who knows. A-at least… try… your best… lest, you… end up like….”

Ned died without ever finishing. He’d lost the last of his strength before the final line. Such was the final moment of the man who harboured ambitions of fame obtained by betraying Coimbra for Bahar. Noel removed her spear from the wall, as Ned had already completely fallen to the floor. Seeing the bifurcated man, Cynthia instinctively averted her gaze.

Is this a nightmare?

Although she had been spared, in her present state she could hardly be said to be comfortably alive. She could not escape the feeling that she would be the next to die. Such cold chills could be felt along her spine; she felt the need to speak up, but somehow, the words couldn’t form. Her mouth was completely dry. Her heart rate had increased. Her body was unconsciously shivering. Noel had become a spawning ground of nightmares, bathed in crimson blood.

Removing a notebook from her breast pocket, she scratched out an entry with a diagonal line.

Chapter 5
Melancholic Rain

"Well then," saying that, Noel turned around, and wiping the bloodstains off her face with her sleeve, she approached Cynthia.

"Kh…"

With a sense of impending doom, Cynthia drew herself back. There was no way to predict what the young girl would do next, and it was the unknown which terrified her. She couldn't help but think that the innocent smile which had earlier floated across Noel's face had been completely alien. Of death she was not afraid, or that was what she had always thought. She herself had beheaded some rebels before; however, she had never gazed into the abyss as deeply as she now was. Eyeing the state that Ned and the others had fallen into, despite her best efforts, an insatiable dread gnawed at her stomach.

"You have three choices to consider."

"W-what?"

Gazing timidly at the bodies, Mirut's voice eked out. It was his first time seeing the dead; naturally he had never killed a man before. He had witnessed his first exchange of human lives, and his mind had not yet caught up with the rapidly developing situation. While he was grateful for being saved, it took all of his might to understand what was happening.

"It's a discussion of what we'll do now you know. This affects you too Mirut, so stop spacing out, and help me think."

"If you say so. At this rate, isn't it fine if we just join up with the main force? We know the people who will be assaulting Rockbell after all," Mirut tilted his head as he thought aloud.

"That is our first choice after all, eh? Only, if we choose that, I'm pretty sure that there will be some problematic things to deal with."

“Why is that?”

“Well then, here’s a question for you. Who was it that killed Captain Ned?”

“… you did, so?”

“Why were we about to die?”

“Because we heard how Captain Ned was actually from Bahar… To prevent the spread of rumors we were to be silenced.”

“And if we mention that after we return, what do you think will happen? Do you think that Ristih, the leader of the rebellion’s army, will just forgive us?”

Noel jokingly continued her scenario. Whether she was acting, or being down to earth was difficult to tell. Even though she had recently killed three people, she continued on in her own little world, completely relaxed.

“If what Ned told us was true we’d probably, no, we’d definitely be killed. It’s a seriously no-good topic after all.”

“That is true, so I guess rejoining the others is out then.”

Noel, with a deep breath, plopped down beside Cynthia as she had done before. Although Cynthia’s face had stiffened, and she’d attempted to roll away, Noel grabbed her cloak, and refused to release it.

“So, for the second choice I thought up all kinds of things, then I ignored them and figured we might just go back to the village and sleep. This option is the simplest, right?”

“True. It does seem simple.”

It wasn’t bad. Originally, they hadn’t volunteered to join the rebellion. Despite their dissatisfactions, they had never intended to take up arms and fight. There wouldn’t be anything strange about returning home as if nothing happened. When the rebels had extorted the village, Noel and the others had yet to join them.

“Unfortunately, if we encounter the trailing rebels, we might see some terrible things. Also, if we return to the village against the flow of the rebel army we’ll seriously stand

out. The problem is that we know Geb, and if we get brought before him, he'll already know about Ned."

"I'm just saying this, but he did seem pretty dangerous. I don't know of any roads back that will allow us to pass by undetected, so it seems like returning to the village is also out."

There was no way to navigate the mountains surrounding the village. Without access to the main roads, they would be limited to unmarked trails, and with neither money nor supplies, such a plan could only be described as suicide. Returning by highway would also lead to confrontation with the rebels.

"Hmm… this is tough."

"Don't act pretentious and just tell us your third option. It's your most thought out plan right?"

"Yup, that is, we'll join Cynthia in protecting the viceroy's wife and child. The rebels are probably not too combat effective so we could probably win by helping the knights in their duty, and we might even gain some plentiful rewards to boot."

"Wha…"

Cynthia balked at Noel's words, but they did make sense. The shock of an enemy who had captured her suddenly discussing becoming an ally had caused her voice to leak out.

"Look, even though it is easy to say that, we are in the rebel army. I'm ineffective enough to be beheaded myself, so this idea sounds ridiculous to me."

"We were only participating due to coercion though. To top it off, the leader is some guy from the neighbouring province. I think I know how to properly tell them; besides, at this rate, the rebels themselves won't be able to find happiness."

She wasn't speaking in her usual flippant tone. She had adopted a manner completely foreign to her usual simpleminded ways. It seemed as though her very mindset had changed.

"Hm…"

“If you don’t want to, Mirut, you can do whatever. I’m going though.”

“F-fine, I get it. We go with option three. Just remember, I’m not responsible if this woman doesn’t say what we want her to,” in the heat of the moment, Mirut agreed to the plan.

“What we do if that happens is simple. We break her neck and run,” spouting words like a general, she spun Cynthia to face her, “That said, you will be rewarded for our safety, so I expect cooperation. Your answer?”

“To betray at the first sign of profit, do you rebels know no shame!?”

Cynthia spat in disgust. Having regained her composure, her knightly sensibilities returned.

Noel may have been an excellent combatant, but she was also extremely lowborn, and Cynthia didn’t like that. While she had been defeated earlier, she was filled with the sense that she wouldn’t lose a second time.

“There’s no other way if I want to achieve happiness. It is the reason that everyone fights after all. I’ll ask once more; will you promise to help us? We don’t have much time, so this is your last chance.”

Noel retrieved the iron hammers from the soldiers she’d killed earlier. She calmly raised one in preparation to bludgeon Cynthia’s head, and expressionlessly let her statement hang. It was immediately apparent what she intended to do if refused; the hammer would crush Cynthia’s skull, and add another corpse to the pile. Faced with such an efficient death, the fighting spirit that had previously welled up dispersed. Thinking further, it wasn’t even an unbalanced trade, or so Cynthia decided to believe.

“I, I understand. You have my word. I swear on my honour that you will live.”

“It’s a promise.”

“Y-yeah,” Cynthia answered while looking aside.

The threats may have been too over the top, but they hadn’t the luxury of waiting for support. That was what she thought, but Noel had spoken in a tone that suggested she’d anticipated everything. She wiped the blood and grime off her face with both hands so that the sight of her wouldn’t cause others to divert their eyes.

“You aren’t allowed to go back on your word, so take good care of us okay?” Noel flashed her teeth in a smile that lit up her face.

Fort Sebtem, near the exit of the secret passage in the tunnel which ran from inside the fort to a natural cave deep within the forest.

When the viceroy’s wife and child were escorted from the cave as they attempted their escape, the Coimbra soldiers who were guarding them were ambushed. The 50 rebels Ned had planted were surrounding the exit with spears at the ready. At the sight of movement, a volley of arrows was unleashed which had already killed several people. Even though Sarah, the viceroy’s wife, was the one being guarded, she had suffered an arrow wound to the right arm. The rebels had around double their numbers, but as they were amateurs in a loose formation, effective command was nearly impossible which left them open. It wouldn’t be impossible to break out, but such an offensive tactic wouldn’t be able to effectively protect their charge, and so the situation had become a stalemate.

“Throw down your swords and surrender! That way, Grohl’s wife and child will be guaranteed safety!”

“Silence shithead! We will give our lives to protect Lady Sarah and Master Elgar! Rouse yourselves, all of you!”

At those words, both forces readied their spears. The rebels used their bows sparingly, as they had been ordered to capture the wife and child alive. Furthermore, if they waited, Ned and the others would ride out from the fort. There was no need to rush.

From further inside the cave came several people, including Noel and Mirut who both had red cloths wound around their right arms. They were followed by the still restrained Cynthia.

“Captain Cynthia!”

“Knight Cynthia, what has caused such an appearance!?”

Responding to the knights’ calls, Cynthia hung her head. Seeing that, the rebel leftenant smiled. It seemed that Ned’s group had finally arrived. Among the rebels

present were two from Bahar, and including Ned, there had been three in the fort. They were the most reliable combat force the rebels had as all their other soldiers were recruits. Having surrounded the enemy, and even having a hostage made their opponent's surrender more likely. Looking at the woman who was captured, the leftenant was sure she was an officer.

"Hold! Is that woman their commander?"

"Yes sir, she is a Coimbra Guard officer in charge of one hundred men, Cynthia Edrich! With captain Ned's assistance, she has been captured!"

Noel, with her right arm extended before her, executed a perfect Horsheido salute, and her usual jovial tone vanished. The leftenant was slightly shocked, but quickly regained himself. Ned may have taught her how to do that. He was surprisingly friendly, and was the sort of man to look after his subordinates. It was mysterious that even though he was temporarily a rebel, he still taught a salute, but that sort of thing didn't need a profound reason anyway.

"He, you kids sure have grown in the time I didn't see you. Did Captain Ned teach you that?"

"Yes sir, he coached us in lots of things! I believe Captain Ned will be arriving shortly!"

"I see, I see! Sit tight until then. If you don't want that knight woman dead, throw down your arms!!"

"Kh…"

The Coimbra Guard were hesitant, but threw down their swords and sat on the spot. With the successful pincer maneuver, their chances of success evaporated. Pathetic resistance would have done nothing to help the woman and child escape.

"All right boys, collect the weapons, and tie them up! Make sure they can't move! Kill the ones who resist!"

"Y-yes sir!"

Following the leftenant's orders, the younger rebels came down with ropes. Their hands were unsteady, and it was unclear whether or not they had properly restrained the knights.

“Hah… you can’t do it, can you? Have you ever tied something before? Here, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

The leftenant removed Sarah, who had been shielding her son, and raised Elgar by his hair.

“What are you doing!?”

“P-please stop!”

“Unhand me, vile peasant!”

“Awww, the wittle prince is reprimanding me. Listen up, anything goes so long as the brat doesn’t die. He’s just one kid, so he can’t do much… Ah, he’s seriously annoying!”

“Please release Elgar!”

“You’re getting pretty annoying yourself!”

Receiving a kick, Sarah released a pained sound.

“M-mother!”

Elgar reached out to help her up, but his hand could not reach her. The leftenant’s mouth twitched, and he tugged on Elgar’s hair.

“She won’t die, so don’t worry. Well, for the moment.”

Laughing, after poking the child’s face, he tied him up. Elgar looked repentant, and tears began to well up, but there was nothing that could be done.

“Still, Captain Ned is taking his time. Oh yeah, are the rest of the men still in the fort?”

“I have a report about that!”

“What is it? These things can just be said you know. I’ll be the one making the captain angry later if you don’t.”

“Understood. You have my apologies!”

After giving her response, Noel approached the leftenant. Elgar glared at her, but she ignored him, and she again saluted the leftenant.

“Ei!”

Suddenly, her concealed hammer came crashing down. The leftenant experienced death, and crumpled on the spot. His helmet had dented, and his limbs convulsed as he lay there. She made sure of his death by crushing his throat beneath her right foot. Falling there, he had not fiercely resisted. It was so fast he hadn’t had the chance. It was a method Noel had learned a long time ago.

“… w-what?”

“Mirut!”

Noel called out, but Mirut was petrified and unable to move. He was supposed to stab the other Baharan while he was still surprised by what Noel had done, but Mirut found himself unable to move in the moment.

“Eh, ah.”

Noel tutted at him as she made her way over to kill the man herself; however, his sword was already drawn and in the process of swinging down.

“The one who hesitates in battle will die! If you don’t want to end up like this that is.”

Cynthia swung her blade to shake off the blood. The fallen soldier from Bahar had taken a slash which split his right shoulder. Cynthia hadn’t been restrained, and had simply had the red cloth wound around her arms. She had a sword, and was placed near the periphery of the rebels.

“I am Cynthia, Captain of 100 Coimbra Guard! I’ve heard of your circumstances from Noel. If you surrender now, your deeds as rebels will be forgotten! If you comply with my offer, you may simply leave the rebel army in peace!”

“S-shutup! We don’t need your words!”

After some silence, the braver young ones hurled jeers. They were the ones who had actively chosen to rebel.

“Whatever training you have, don’t think you can compete with regular soldiers! If you don’t want to die, throw down your arms!”

Cynthia roared as she, without using a weapon, knocked the sword out of a young man’s hand. It was only then that the tightly grasped weapons of the rebel forces began to be relinquished. Cynthia’s subordinates quickly rose up, took their weapons, and once more became a fighting force.

“I’ll explain the circumstances from here on out, including the reason behind the rebellion’s origin. After that, decide for yourselves. Just be aware that joining the rebellion is a serious crime. Don’t think that claiming to have been forced into it will be accepted after this.”

Having finished the initial statement, she continued on to explain her theory on how the rebellion began. The Coimbra soldiers were irate, and from time to time expressed their rage. After listening to Cynthia’s story, although the flying column was doubtful of her words, all of them still chose to leave the rebellion. Not only did those coerced into joining quit, but also those who had volunteered quit as they did not like the idea of being used by the nobility. Most of the people decided to return home, but the people of Zoim, and several of the other curious ones, decided to follow Cynthia. That was because they wished to receive a reward from the viceroy of Coimbra, or to join in on the front lines as volunteer soldiers. Naturally, none of them had particularly admirable goals. Noel was thinking about how important appearance was while looking at the other people and yawning, and a vein on Cynthia’s temple bulged.

“Lady Sarah, your wound…”

“I am fine, thank you. An arrow wound is a trivial matter.”

“For this degree of incompetence, how can I apologise?”

“It was thanks to your efforts that I was saved, please take pride in that. Furthermore, the one who had planned this was my father, who will take responsibility. In fact, I am the one who should be ashamed,” Sarah clearly stated.

The one responsible for not only his daughter, but also his grandson had been Count Barel. Usually such a thing would call for prosecution; however, mercy had its place. If Grohl’s family had not been there, it would have been dubious as to whether or not he would have sent reinforcements. If he had been so reluctant, it may have lessened

his retainers' loyalty. They would not express dissatisfaction aloud, but it made suggesting improvements to the government difficult.

"We should quickly hide from the remaining rebels, rest until nightfall, and then head for the nearest guardpost."

If they could, they would head to a nearby village and acquire a horse drawn carriage, but that could only work if the village did not support the rebels.

"I'm entrusting everything to you. Elgar must survive. Arms, or legs, I'd sacrifice anything to keep him safe."

"Mother, must you speak of such things?"

"Elgar, you will inherit Coimbra one day. Selfishly dying on your own is not allowed. You cannot forget this," Sarah's words were both a warning and an admonishment.

"Young prince, rest assured. I shall ensure the two of you safely return. Your guards will put all their efforts towards this goal."

Cynthia saluted at attention, and turned to give orders to her subordinates.

"Hey, hey, is that the viceroy's kid? You called him "young prince" right? Even though he's so small, he sure does look proud, eh?"

"Oi, I can hear you!"

"I want to be important too. That way I might find happiness you know. Hey, should I act important?"

"Can you just stop now? Even if I say that, you've been all self-important for a while now."

"Is that so? Then should I become viceroy?"

Cynthia looked at Noel with eyes that wanted to kill as she muttered absurdities. She wanted her removed in a single strike, but had to dismiss the idea. From her movements earlier, it was clear that Noel was no amateur. To walk up to the enemy's commanding officer as though it was a simple visit whilst concealing a war hammer required nerves of steel. Even up to his moment of death, her opponent had probably

never realised her intentions. It couldn't be known what she would do if she went back on her word. Cynthia couldn't imagine Noel's potential response; she couldn't shake the feeling that the hammer was coming for her next.

"You there, don't chatter about nonsense! Make your preparations so we can quickly leave this place! Also, to you who've become volunteer soldiers of Coimbra, remove those red cloths! They are an eyesore!"

"Understood, sir!" Noel happily replied.

So as not to stand out, they had not moved far from the fort. The sun had been veiled by night's cloak, and so they had decided to rest. The soldiers aside, Sarah's exhaustion had built up considerably. She was unaccustomed to navigating difficult terrain by foot, so it was no wonder that she was so exhausted.

"Knight Cynthia, would it be acceptable to light a fire?"

"Not really, but given the circumstances, it may become unavoidable. Maintain vigilance."

"Well, are you going to start one then?" Noel asked cheerfully, as though she was asking an old friend.

It seemed her memories of being enemies were already distant in her mind.

"You don't speak to me like I'm an officer anymore? It might just be my opinion, but you had excellent form during your performance earlier."

"It's tiring in all sorts of ways you know. More importantly, if you won't start a fire, you can let me do it. I brought an amazing treasure with me. I think it's a super miracle item anyway."

"A miracle product? What would you be doing with such a high class thing?"

"He he, I found it."

Having said that, she rushed off to where the soldiers were preparing a fire pit. She suddenly grasped her bident and thrust it into the ground.

"What are you doin'?"

“Just watch, okay? Because this is pretty great. Here I go!”

Noel lightly tapped it with her finger, and a flame burst from its points. Beneath the interwoven branches, the blaze roared energetically.

“What’s that?”

“Just now, the fire spread from that spear. I named it ‘the curious spear’. It really is curious isn’t it?”

“No way, even of the miracle products, I’ve never heard of something like that! What kind of mechanism is involved!?”

Drawing closer, just as the hand was about to trace the spear’s patterns…

“It’s hot!”

Emitting incredible heat, it couldn’t be properly grasped. The rest of the soldiers tried to grasp it as well, but on touching it, they all gasped in pain.

“It looks like if anyone besides me touches it, they get burned. Such a curious thing…”

“What’s curious!? I don’t get it! Are you sure it isn’t cursed?”

“That was rude. It’s one of my treasures.”

Perhaps there was oil in the shaft, that was released at the tip. The usual explanation would be that the ignition method required thrusting the tip into something and the friction from tapping the haft, but if what Noel said was true, then she could produce the flames at will. It was absurd, yet convenient.

“So the bident could do something like that, eh? I had no idea either.”

Even Mirut, who had known her the longest, hadn’t been expecting it.

“Amazing isn’t it? He he, it is one of my treasures so I won’t give it away you know.”

“It is incredible, but you don’t really need it to get so hot. If you can’t hold it there’s no point.”

“I also have a curious picture book, would you like to waste some time reading it?”

Mirut raised his hands and shook his head, “Save that for Cal. If we make it safely back to the village that is.”

“I truly can’t understand your reasoning. I have difficulty comprehending you and your treasures. I’ll say this once, do whatever. You’re the only one with such nonsensical ideas.”

Noel was happily reading the worn book. Glancing at it from the side, its pages were wrinkled, and the writing was illegible. Cynthia’s mental fatigue increased yet again as she further considered how to achieve her objective; how she could salvage the uncontrollable situation. If she played a poor hand, she could wind up by herself; she couldn’t easily smile with such a scenario dangling over her head by a thread. After quenching her thirst with some water, she sighed as if to expel her hazy thoughts.

“Hey, Noel.”

“Hm?”

“That Cynthia’s in charge of one hundred men right? How much of an achievement is that?”

“It’s better than ten, and worse than a thousand.”

“No, that much I understand…”

Having overheard them, she felt it would be an excellent opportunity to explain.

After clearing her throat, she haughtily began, “Ahem, in the military, rank is obviously present. Not only in Coimbra, but also the other provinces. The system is shared by all of Horsheido.”

First are the fodder. They are the conscripts drafted during a time of war. There is also a leftenant, but he doesn’t necessarily lead the men.; he would be only in charge of about ten. To be in command of one hundred men or more, one must be of knightly status and the ranks are as follows: commander of one hundred; senior commander of one hundred, more prestigious than the standard, but in charge of as many men; commander of one thousand; senior commander of one thousand; and so on. Those

were the usual numbers of soldiers that were assigned; however, things such as commanding five-hundred were not rare.

The present situation made it difficult to ascend the ranks to general in any province. As there were no major wars being fought that was to be expected. A major general commanded ten thousand men, and the two in Coimbra were Wilm and Gaddis. The general was the viceroy, and above him was the emperor.

Cynthia's position over one hundred at the age of 20 was not because of her own abilities, but because of heredity. Her late father had been a major general. There was almost no other way for a woman to become a knight. Her older brother had died of illness while he was young and so there had been no one else to inherit their house, or their family name.

For that reason, Cynthia had undergone rigorous training in preparation for her marriage. Wilm, Gaddis, and her late father had been good friends, and so she was looked after well. Although some of her affiliates spoke poorly of her behind her back, she continued on with all of her might.

"So, we're simple soldiers?"

"You're actually slightly lower than a regular soldier; basically an errand runner. What a great name volunteer soldier is. Ha ha ha, I'm sorry Mirut."

"You're one too."

"I guess."

Cynthia had not held back, and plainly stated some things that were not easy to hear. If they died, their names wouldn't be remembered, and their families would receive no pension.

"The unfortunate one is you! First off, I only became a volunteer soldier because… ah, nevermind, sorry," Mirut was halted by the glare of a nearby soldier.

"Don't worry. Only that idiot needs to worry about her language. You don't have to get used to it, I won't be so harsh on a volunteer."

"T-thank you very much!"

“I was just irritated.”

Noel was snickering in the background. Her picture book was closed, and tucked safely away in a pouch hanging by her waist.

“It’s your fault!”

“Ah…”

“What is it all of a sudden?”

“Clouds came out so the beautiful moon was hidden.”

“True. If the fire went out it would be pitch black. Well, that would make escaping easier at least.”

With his eyes drawn to the sky, he noticed the clouds had begun to drift. Perhaps it would rain. It would make their detection more difficult, cover their trail, and bog down their enemy. The rain would truly be a blessing, but there was someone present who disagreed.

“Rainy days herald rising horrors. It’s always like that, so I hate rain.”

“It’s like that then. I can tell from your face alone that you don’t like the rain.”

“Yup. Particularly, nightly rains are the worst. It’s something of a living hell for me, I guess.”

“You’re a dramatic one, eh?”

“It’s true, so it can’t be helped.”

Having expressed herself, Noel wiped her face with a wet towel. As the dirt and blood washed away, for the moment, she was completely refreshed.

Chapter 6
The Pledge of 2 Hammers

Cynthia's troupe avoided the conspicuous highways and instead stuck to the forests. Their progress had been slow as they only proceeded once the area ahead of them had been scouted and confirmed to be safe. Once they had sufficiently distanced themselves from Rockbell, they could simply take the highway back to the capital. Cynthia was faced with the choice of fleeing quickly, or escaping cautiously, with her foremost priority being the protection of Grohl's wife and child. The heavy responsibility of fleeing a land which threatened death was ever pressing on her mind. In the centre of their formation were Sarah, Elgar, the guards, Cynthia, and, for some reason, Noel was also present. Although Cynthia had tried to drive the hindrance away, Noel had nimbly stepped out of her reach, and proceeded forwards. Not wanting to waste unnecessary energy, Cynthia resigned herself to pretending to not notice what she could plainly see.

The rest of the soldiers, forming a circle around their charge, marched cautiously on, with their weapons at the ready. The volunteers, whose ability had yet to be confirmed, were placed in the rear of the formation. Even if they fell behind, they weren't going to be looked after. The man on point held a torch, and cleared the foliage to create a path, for without light, a journey by night was far too dangerous. To remain concealed, they ceased movements during daylight.

"…"

"Lady Sarah, young Prince, how are you feeling at the moment?" Cynthia asked as they walked.

Sarah's face was haggard; her visage was distinctly fatigued. As they were executing a forced march that was enough to wear down experienced soldiers, that much was only natural. Unfortunately for her, they could not afford regular breaks. It meant death if the enemy caught up with them, so even if she had to be carried, the advance would not stop.

"I am fine; however, Elgar is a little tired."

Elgar made a face and spouted, "I'm fine too! Please stop treating me like a child!"

His complaints about not being treated like an adult were decidedly childlike. Fixing his hair, Sarah gently patted his head. It was good that he didn't bemoan such a lengthy trek because he was a healthy young 12 year old boy.

"Sorry for that. You've grown into a fine man. You're gallant much like your father."

"Thanks!"

Watching the two, Cynthia's expression softened. Although all seemed well, a foolish existence meandered into her field of vision. Before her eyes, Noel turned to face the scene with a burning curiosity. Their eyes met, and just as she was wondering what was so fun about the situation, Noel gave her a thumbs up.

This idiot isn't finished yet!?

The most vigorous of the entire party was Noel. Completely at ease, she moved with an easygoing attitude as though she was out for a stroll.

"Noel, your standing is not the same as these people's. Know your place."

"Why are we different?"

Cynthia looked down her nose at Noel and plainly asserted, "Why? Because you're a pleb. The world of nobility is alien to you, let alone the world of the Waldek house to which Lady Sarah and the young prince belong. If it wasn't for the current situation, you wouldn't even be allowed to approach them!"

On the continent, the plebeians were not allowed the honour of a surname. Only those of the knightly or noble class could take up such a name, and a knight had to at least be in command of one hundred men in order to chose a name. Nobles received their names through blood or money. It was possible to buy into a family as a new branch with a suitable investment. Cynthia was not only a knight, but also tentatively a lower ranking noble.

That said, it is true that nobility is just a name. In fact, it even brings along its own troublesome baggage.

"I see, then nobles are super important right?"

"That's how it is, so if you'll just realise your standing…"

“Then, you’re important too?”

“Eh?”

Noel had, without restraint, asked Elgar a question. Sarah, who was beside him, did not rebuke her, but rather, a confused look floated across her face. During peaceful times it would have been appropriate to shout in response to her insolence; however, the current situation did not allow for such social conventions.

“Did you even hear what I was saying to you Noel!?”

“Isn’t that right, young Prince, you’re super important too?”

“I, I think so. I am the man who will one day rule Coimbra, Elgar Waldek. You will definitely see me become great.”

“Then I’ll give you something good. When you rise it will become your greatest retainer, so be sure to share your happiness with me too okay?”

“A… present? You want to become my subordinate, is that it?”

“Yup, after all, you’ll become great right? So here it is,” smiling broadly, Noel pressed something into the confused Elgar’s chest.

It was the hammer which had earlier smashed the skulls of the Bahar soldiers. The weapon was too large for a child to easily wield; dried blood still adorned its head.

“What are you trying to give him!? Young Prince, you have no obligation to accept something like that!”

“I have one too, so now we match, see?”

She took up the hammer she still had from behind her. After making a motion as if performing a toast, she whirled the hammer around. It was unmistakably what one of Ned’s subordinates had been carrying. At some point she must to have picked it up without anyone noticing. The criteria for Noel’s treasures were unknown considering the how hammer, which was in no way out of the ordinary, somehow qualified. It had proven highly effective in battle, but Noel’s skill had been more responsible for that.

“What made you decide to give this to me?”

“Because it’s the hammer that saved you and your mum. It might prove super handy later. Hey, can you see how it could be a magical weapon?”

“Hmm, even if you say so, would that make it true? Somehow, it has good weight, and I think I could get used to wielding it.”

While grasping it in both hands, Elgar raised an eyebrow. Obviously, because it was a hammer it held significant heft, and fabric was wrapped around the shaft to ensure a good grip. He accepted it even as it seemed he was still pondering whether or not it would be a good idea. Taking a string, she skillfully fastened it to his belt.

“Young Prince, please don’t keep such a filthy thing. That girl is a fool who doesn’t know the ways of the world, so you don’t have to play along.”

“My life was not saved by such a filthy thing. It is from the hand of a fool who doesn’t understand the world.”

“But!”

“Outer appearance doesn’t matter. What is important is whether or not you can use it now, or at a later time. Learn about the things surrounding you, that is how I gained some truly wonderful experiences.”

Elgar stopped Cynthia with his hand, and turned to face Noel.

“Your name was Noel right?”

“Yup.”

“You have my thanks. I was unable to express my gratitude earlier. Volunteer Soldier Noel, thank you for saving me and my mother. You have my uttermost appreciation for what you have done.”

“It’s fine. In return, don’t forget about earlier, okay?”

“Okay, it’s a deal. I, Elgar Waldek swear to uphold my agreement with Noel. You have the oath of a noble, which will never be broken.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“That’s great. I look forward to that time.”

Noel and Elgar shared a happy smile as though they had completely forgotten how they were frantically attempting to escape an ever nearing doom. They did not heed the difference in social standing between the nobility and plebeians, but the time when discrimination fell by the wayside was only temporary, and the old ways would later return.

Is it because he is still a child? No, he sincerely gave his thanks, and he was more adult about the situation than I was.

Although she was uncertain of her own feelings, Cynthia’s life had also been spared. Without Noel, she would have surely died. Because of her useless pride, she had yet to give proper thanks.

“Elgar, where did you learn that manner of speech? I could have mistaken you for your father.”

“I have studied many things. I cannot remain a child forever.”

“I’m studying too. I have been in quandary over the discovery of interminable happiness. It’s been trial and error every day,” spouting difficult words, Noel expressed the ridiculous yet again.

It was hard to decide whether or not she was truly an idiot.

I don’t understand. I don’t understand her at all.

“Hmm, philosophy, eh? I will make sure to consider it later. Our castle’s library contains many books. With enough searching I should be able to find what you seek.”

“Really? Thank you, young Prince!”

Eyes aglow, Noel grasped Elgar’s hands while he blushed in embarrassment. Whatever his expression was, from what Sarah could see, it seemed to be a happy one. At a glance they were both being children together; Noel the sister, Elgar the brother; elder and younger.

“Uaa…”

“… Could you please consider your position. That’s right, when you understand, if you understand, say ‘yes’.”

“… Yes, I understand,” Noel bowed whilst rubbing the cheek which had been pinched.

The surrounding soldiers, and even Sarah, smiled at the exchange. Cynthia glared at the soldiers, and marched ahead of them.

They continued on in silence for some time. Tree leaves rustled in the wind, and the the silence became intermingled with the sound of rain.

“Rain?”

“Yup, well this is the worst. A~h, seriously the worst.”

“This is a fateful accident; a blessed rain. It should wash away our tracks.”

“Well, I don’t like it.”

Noel had twisted her face to the limit, and tutting, covered her head with a cloth. Even her speech had become irritated. She truly detested the rain; not even able to stand the feeling of it dripping on her, she consciously walked near the trees.

“O-oi, don’t stray from the formation.”

“It’s fine, so leave me alone.”

“What are you, a child?”

Cynthia was surprised. She again became aware of the fear which she had once felt towards Noel. There was almost no remaining trace of the naive girl who had spoken to them earlier. Her detached character and shameless eccentricity had all but washed away in the rain that now caused her to hunch over, but the filthy clothes she still wore attested to the fact that the earlier scene had not been a lie. Her hair which was still red, now appeared like a stained pelt. Although the stench of blood was fading, it could still be sensed; the girl who acted appropriately for her age concealed a vicious, ruthless beast. From her innocence, cruelty could spring at any time, only to disappear as suddenly as it had appeared.

I didn't think I had understood her, but this still took me by surprise. It was certain that she had been in the rebel army. With the way things have progressed so far, my fears will probably prove baseless, but…

For the moment, she planned on thanking her if they made it back safely. Cynthia determined so in her heart. Up ahead, a lone soldier burst out before their formation. He was one of the scouts who had been sent ahead to investigate the situation in Rockbell. If reinforcements had already arrived, it was unlikely for them to have been repulsed by the rebels, but the news that he brought was a report of the worst possible situation.

"Rockbell has fallen! The traitors have pillaged it, and flames roar above the district!"

"It fell too quickly. Was the enemy force even large enough for that? I want a full report!"

"The enemy was unusually alert to danger, and I was unable to safely ascertain much information. It is unknown if Count Barel was able to escape to safety!"

At the news, Sarah and Elgar made mournful expressions. Count Barel was probably already dead. Rockbell had low walls, and if surrounded could probably only survive several days' incessant attacks. The danger was greater than usual considering that the rebels would continue, even if their leader was to die.

"I see, if the leader is an officer from Bahar it would be obvious for them to have the knowledge on how to properly prepare a siege. Damn those cowardly Baharans!"

Most likely, the Red Circle Army had prepared siege equipment in advance, and had persistently attacked. It probably wasn't too hard for them to breach the gates, and overthrow the minimal garrison stationed in Rockbell. Count Barel had probably attempted to break through the encirclement to escape, but failed miserably, meeting a pathetic end. When the flags of the Red Circle Army were raised above Rockbell, they flapped in the breeze of a hellish scene of pillage and massacre.

"Knight Cynthia, whatever shall we do!?"

"We will carry out our mission! Whatever happens, we will escort you safely to Madress!"

At the exact moment that Cynthia turned to encourage her soldiers, a large number of flaming arrows blazed through the darkness. In the rain, there was no way for the flames to spread, but the light revealed their formation.

“Shit! Why here…”

“They probably followed the scout back.”

Just as Noel had guessed, the enemy approached from behind the scout. They had probably allowed him to leave with the intent of following him. Cynthia cursed her own carelessness as the enemy soldiers closed the distance.

“To think I doubted it! It’s probably these guys! Don’t let them escape!!”

“Absolutely make sure the woman and child remain alive! On Sir Ristih’s orders!”

“Yaaaah!!”

With voices raised, the enemy descended upon them.

“Lady Sarah, young Prince, do not become separated from me! All right men, do not let them approach!”

“But, at this rate, their advance will crush us!”

“Silence! Do not break the circle! Just hold on!”

“See, I said it. Rainy days are the worst,” Noel muttered disgruntledly.

Her tone was so harsh it was impossible to read the emotion in it.

“Now is not the time! Stop messing around and form up!”

“Hey, can I maybe borrow that fluttery thing? You can have mine in exchange.”

“Wai, what?”

“It’s fine, hurry up. If you want to die here, just do whatever,” coldly stating her mind, Noel roughly grabbed Sarah’s coat, put it on, and dressed Sarah in her own rags.

Noel donned the luxurious coat, and took up her bag in her left hand. She wasn't very tall, and so was unable to properly see her surroundings.

"Exactly what are you trying to do!?"

"I don't have time to explain. If I do this well, be sure to reward me for it, okay? We're in agreement?"

Immediately after finishing her words, Noel took up her bident, and ran into the forest. A roaring flame at the end of her bident, she held it high for the enemy to see. As she charged into the darkness, she cried out in a loud voice.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa~~~~~~!!"

"What? A woman's voice?"

"It's a woman, she's running away! It has to be Sarah! Catch her!"

"She's carrying something! It's probably the kid! All right, the reward is mine!"

"Oi, what about these guys!?"

"Ignore them! They're just the remnants of a defeated army!"

Chasing after the blazing light, all at once, the encirclement dissolved.

So that's it! She came up with that quickly! How reckless…

Having thought that far, there wasn't enough time to explain.

Raising her sword, she ordered, "Now is the time! Break out, on me!!"

"U-understood!"

Having broken through the encirclement with all of her might, Cynthia had left the forest, and advanced as far as Coimbra's Milan highway. Nearer to the capital, they confirmed that it was safe to march while flying the Coimbra flag. With that their mission was complete. Her legs like wooden clubs, barely managing to stand, Cynthia made her report.

“Somehow, we seem to have escaped. Quickly, send a runner to the advanced party.”

“A-are we safe? But, Noel…”

“Cynthia, and all you soldiers, I thank you from the bottom of my heart. That heroic girl as well.”

Sarah closed her eyes. Elgar, breathing heavily, frantically checked his surroundings. They all knew without him telling them that he was searching for Noel.

“Waiting for Noel is… no good after all?”

Even though they had used a decoy, such a thing was not what they had expected to do. They had only thought to fight to the death, but that reasoning could have only led to failure. The one who had paved the way to the success of their mission had not been a soldier, but that girl. It would be nigh impossible to escape alive when acting as a decoy under those circumstances. With so many pursuers it was only a matter of time before they surrounded her; furthermore, she was hunted by lustful traitors. They didn’t want to imagine her fate.

At the least, it would be good if she died while maintaining her human dignity. I never was able to thank her for what she’d done.

Cynthia had held on to her doubts right until the end despite having been saved by her twice. She felt like the worst kind of person.

“Ah, um, Knight Cynthia. Noel…”

“She was most likely captured or killed. Either way, it can’t have been good.”

“No way, there’s no way, she wouldn’t just simply die like…”

Mirut stood still, unable to find words.

“Sorry, but at least we can inform the viceroy of her accomplishments. Her name and honour…”

“That doesn’t mean anything if she’s dead. Why… why did this happen!?”

Interrupting his words, Mirut's face revealed the tears that leaked out despite his turning aside. Perhaps he had harboured special feelings towards her. Not only the faces of the people from her village, but also the faces of the soldiers were darkened. Her slightly detached, bottomless positivity had at some point or another, captivated every one of them. Elgar, Sarah, and even Cynthia herself were included.

Sadness doesn't help anybody. I am this lot's commanding officer. Unless I lead them all the way to the end of our mission, how will they fight?

Cynthia unsheathed her sword, and stepped before the party.

"Thanks to the valiant efforts of Volunteer Soldier Noel, we were able to escape a land of death! We have brought Lady Sarah and the young Prince to safety!"

To fix her voice which had become dry, she paused for a beat before continuing to express her feelings.

"Volunteer Soldier Noel, we pray that as you have laid down your life for the success of our mission, you will rest in peace with your fellow soldiers. Everyone, salute!"

Cynthia held her sword before her, and the soldiers, in perfect order, saluted the forest. Sarah and Elgar offered up a prayer. The sun seemed to impulsively show itself. They had been running frantically, and so hadn't noticed that the rain had stopped. With much weighing on her mind, Cynthia closed her eyes. After paying respects for about a minute, a sound was heard behind them. Worried something may have happened, Cynthia opened her eyes, and carefully turned around.

"Ei!"

"Pfflt…"

Turning around, something thick was smeared on her. A gritty substance entered her mouth. There was no mistake that it was mud.

"W-what!?"

"Don't just kill people off like that. More importantly, it would be a massive waste to die on such a sunny day."

"Y-you were alive!?"

Mirut's voice was a combination of surprise and joy. The other soldiers were the same.

"Yup, I won't die in a place like that. Wait, did I miss out on a posthumous promotion? Does that even happen for volunteer soldiers? Like, would I have been a senior volunteer soldier? Hey, do those exist?"

Cackling away, Noel patted Cynthia gently on the back. Rather than Noel dying horribly, she had tossed her opponents around like beanbags. Not only were the rebel's pursuit troops chasing her in the dark, but the branches of the thick foliage had entangled their torches making it almost impossible for them to even see what they were after. The light at the end of her spear served not only to distract the enemy, but also to lead them into traps. She would sneak up on isolated men and gift them her hammer in the form of a single strike such that the number of bodies could not be said to be few by the time morning came. After waiting for the rain to cease under the cover of a tree, and having confirmed that the sun had come out, she walked the shortest rout to the highway. Having made her way to the rendezvous point, she found that the others had decided on their own that she was dead, and were even offering up a silent prayer in remembrance of her, so she had taken the opportunity to mess with them. She proudly explained the events which had led up to their current situation.

"T-this mischievous girl! I am, for the moment, your superior officer you know! I am a commander of one hundred men, and a member of the illustrious Coimbra Knighthood! What were you thinking to smear my face with mud!?"

Indignantly wiping the mud from her face, which had flushed red, Cynthia had raised an angry voice.

"I have no excuses, sir! Um, I salute Captain Cynthia!"

Noel stiffly saluted with muddy hands. The salute itself was as flawless as ever, but her expression didn't match it.

"I won't forgive you just because you started acting appropriately just now! When we get you to the capital, I'll make sure you're thoroughly educated!"

"As a volunteer soldier, I will show appropriate restraint! So I can receive my reward, let us make haste to return. I ran pretty fast to get here though, so I wonder if it'll be okay to just continue like that even though I'm pretty tired…"

Already bored of her performance, Noel released a large sigh.

“Silence! You are under my command now! That is what I have decided! We’ll beat that cowardly attitude out of you, and start again from scratch!”

“C-captain. That is a little excessive. Noel is still only a volunteer soldier you know.”

Her subordinate advocated for restraint, and naturally, she ignored him.

“Silence! We shall meet with reinforcements! Follow me!”

“Help me～”

Cynthia dragged Noel down the highway by the scruff of her neck. It was nearly impossible to see her as being a soldier capable of easily defeating enemies, and safely returning. The soldiers were dumbfounded while watching the receding shape the two made.

“I-it would be pretty bad if we didn’t catch up…”

“Yeah…”

“Was the captain always like this? She always seemed more rigid, and irritable…”

Cynthia had no friends who were of a similar age to her own. She had always been one to quietly train and angrily shout so as not to be made light of by the soldiers. Despite that, she managed to accrue great jealousy from her peers. For the soldiers, it was their first glimpse of the ups and downs that Cynthia had always experienced.

“True. But… she seems to get along with that girl. Don’t they seem like old friends?”

“I, I guess I can see that? Well, it feels like she’s been through a lot, at least the captain does.”

“That makes sense. I do have a good eye for people after all.”

Elgar glanced at the exited soldiers, and said, “Mother, we too should follow. The time to rest shall soon be upon us.”

“That’s right Elgar. Then let us make haste. Honoured men, please look after us until the end.”

At Sarah's encouragement, the soldiers assembled into their formation.

"Leave it to us!"

"It seems you are quite fascinated by that hammer."

"Yes," Elgar confirmed as he gazed after the distant Noel, "This shall be my treasure. To never give up a fight to the end, that is what this hammer has taught me. I wish to follow that example myself."

"As I thought, that stupid woman won't die even if she's been killed."

"You must be relieved Mirut."

"Shut up. Well, I do feel better."

Embarrassedly wiping his eyes, Mirut smacked his mouth which had been loosely blabbering. It was well known how much Mirut cared for Noel. The others were even betting on whether Fraser, or he would fall for her first. He himself was the only one unaware of this.

"You really aren't honest, eh? Well, we still aren't finished with our job. I'm exhausted."

"Yeah, after the rebellion is suppressed, I'll surely head back to my village."

"Do you think that Fraser and Kraft are okay? Even considering that they took Rockbell…"

"If things get bad, they'll probably run. They aren't too stupid."

"That's true, and man am I hungry."

Spouting such frivolous things, Mirut and the other villagers began to walk along the highway. Noel and Cynthia who had gone ahead, seemed to have already met up with the reinforcements.

In Mirut's heart, he felt that: *She really is an energetic one.*

Author's Note:

I will briefly introduce the provinces of the Libelika Continent:

- Coimbra: In the south west of the continent. It is widely acknowledged as weak in the event of war. Before bankruptcy, it held great wealth. It produced many artists. The viceroy is Grohl Wardka

- Bahar: In the central region of the continent, it is east of Coimbra. With no coast, it primarily profits through Ribeldam. It is famous for its strength. It was the last region to fall under the Sun Emperor Bergis, and has a culture that deeply values the art of war. The viceroy is Amil Wardka, younger brother of Grohl.

- Ribeldam: In the south of the continent, it is located east of Coimbra and south of Bahar. It has replaced Coimbra as a trading power. It has close ties to Bahar, and it has great pride in its navy.

Chapter 7
Feast of the Fallen Beast

Rockbell had fallen to the Red Circle Army. Broken bodies, soaring smoke, haggard homes, and smashed storefronts were left in the wake of past violence. The heads of the guards who had remained faithful to the end were strung up in the trees, and Sarah's father, Count Barel Ludwing was hung in eight pieces for all to see. Those who survived had not escaped the pitiful state which engulfed the town. Women and children were tormented, and prisoners of war were used to test new weapons. Vulgar laughter veiled shrieks and wails.

"Ah, this one fought back. It gets boring when that doesn't happen."

It had been some time since Geb had enjoyed the stench of blood and madness, for him it was the true pleasure of a fight. It marked every battlefield where life and death swiftly changed hands. It was a smell only known by the victors who survived. A single sniff could make one sick, so Geb willingly sought out the places of death.

"Heh, when I'm done with this, you'd better not have already had your fill. The best has yet to come."

On the battlefield, instincts and greed were made bare, and fates collided. It was heaven for the victor, and hell for the vanquished. There was no class distinction there; of nobles, plebeians, and emperors, all were stripped bare. All that remained was the question of life or death.

"Hail comrades, are you having fun?"

"Y-yeah!"

"Then all is well. For things like this, enthusiasm is important. Do it to your heart's content. That said, if you still want to be able to play around with someone, is not moderation important too? There are still many replacements, but they won't all be so pretty."

Geb called out to a youth who was bent over a young woman by the roadside. He himself was blending in with the mob quite well, but he had an important duty to

fulfill. He'd have to restrain himself until such a time as it was complete, for, after all, he was a knight of Bahar. Without having his fill of the stench of the blood and smoke he walked down the street.

Ah, how nice. These naive youths fall into vice, wreathed in desire. I love how human it is. Ethics and righteousness won't sustain one's life. Live as you please, and die when your luck runs out.

Without thinking of the future, he put all his power into the present so that each moment could be enjoyed. He did not heed others. Setting aside the rebellion and other such things, he found it most amusing to simply live in the moment. Count Barel, who had been torn asunder, was no exception. His life had ended after squeezing taxes from his impoverished fellows to live a life of ultimate luxury. Despite the excruciating look in his eyes at his own demise, as his entire life had been one of opulence, he most likely regretted nothing.

In comparison, the thought of an uninteresting life floated through his mind alongside the face of his commanding officer. He only ever revealed an air of constant complaining to his subordinates; he was a man who lived to obediently follow orders and rise to the top; he was Ristih.

We are, Ristih is, vigorously working towards Madress' capture, but who knows how it will turn out? Either way, the stormy path is the most interesting one.

Thinking such things as he walked, from a nearby house, he heard a pleasant voice. Hearing it, it sounded as though it belonged to a young man. Whimsically peeking in, he recognised the face. It took the form of what had once been an upright youth.

"Ou, ou, you can do it after all, Fraser and Kraft. How about it, wasn't it worth it to come with me?"

"I had no idea that it was so fun to take things that aren't mine! Heh, ha ha ha!"

Wine in hand, Fraser was waited upon by a girl who was in a stupor. Her father, who had protected her was, in a few words, already a corpse. The body's head was, half in jest, kicked aside.

"That's how it is, that's how it is! Pillaging others' belongings is the best. It's even better when you take your foes greatest treasures, eh? It is the flavour only a victor can savour!"

“Even though Kraft was so scared before, look at how he’s doing now. Ha ha, she’s totally blue!”

“Young ones are like that. You’ll grow up to be something like me, and you won’t have to whine like children hoping to be bought treats. That is if you live long enough to get a good taste of it all.”

“…”

Kraft was in a trance and didn’t respond to words. His hands which had been strengthened by working the fields were twisting a woman’s neck to the limit. She was the mother of the girl who was entertaining Fraser. Her eyes were wide open, but only the whites were visible, and her tongue hung pathetically from her mouth. She was more than likely already dead. Kraft had been overwhelmed by his carnal desires; the young man who had worried over others’ gazes had vanished. He had the face of a starved wolf, and Fraser, who was making fun of him, was much the same. They had already abandoned thoughts of their fellows from Coimbra. The people before them were not the detested nobility, but simple people of the town. Now the town had only two types of people: winners, and losers; looters, and looted; only those remained.

“Oi Kraft, isn’t that one already dead? How much longer will you play with her before seeking the company of another woman?”

“…”

“This is no good. You aren’t listening at all.”

“The others might become a problem, so don’t kill too many of them! Remember how to have fun without killing.”

“I get it!”

“Then we have no problems, do what you will!”

“Of course, I’ll do as a please! After all, we are the winners. Ha ha! We are the winners!”

Fraser was still in high spirits as Geb started to sprinkle some wine on Kraft, who was still unresponsive.

“That’s the spirit Fraser. After this we’ll take the Milan highway and in one swoop, be upon the capital city Madress if it all goes according to plan.”

“S-seriously!?”

“Why of course. The prestigious nobility gathers there after all. They’ve been using the money from our labours to carelessly live their lives. Therefore, we must righteously collect the debts they owe the people as the Red Circle Army.”

“…Noble…”

“They’ll all be well dressed right? Their youngest daughters have continued in such a way all their lives, dressing their entire bodies in precious gems. They’ve never done hard labour so their hands are beautiful and soft, and their bodies are well formed and gentle. Not to mention how packed their houses should be with treasures. We’ll steal, and steal, and steal until we’re exhausted!”

As Geb raised his voice, Fraser nodded with a smile. Kraft, despite his mania, furiously shook his head up and down.

I love to see it when they completely fall like this.

“Ah, I know this is changing the topic but, this is about your buddies in the flying column…”

“Uh, so this is about the others who went with Mirut and Noel?”

“That’s right. I don’t know which way they went. Do you know anything?”

“I don’t know. They might have just gone back to the village. Ha, if they could’ve had this much fun by just waiting around, they really are idiots.”

Fraser was vexed, but he imagined the forms of Mirut and the others. Noel’s face was the final thing to float through his mind. Comparing her to the girl who was beside him, he forcefully embraced her, and in that way he stole what was out of his grasp. For him it was simple: consent was unneeded for the winner. That was the order of things, and he’d do it again next time too.

“Oi oi, that’s not a very eager face. Young ones sure are nice, eh?”

“Did you need something from the flying wing?”

“No, it isn’t a big deal. With that, I’ll be on my way, later we’ll have a toast to our victory!”

“Yeah!”

“See you.”

Raising his hand, Geb shut the door behind him, flexing his neck as though expecting an inconvenience. It was going to be troublesome what he had to report to Ristih, and things looked like they would become seriously annoying.

Ah, such a bother. Stupid Ned, what happened to his ‘greatest feat’? Overworking and dying won’t help you know.

Geb arrived at the largest mansion of Count Barel’s fief. The entrance was fortified and guarded by several soldiers who worked together to open the gate at Geb’s signal.

In the Red Circle Army, Ristih, a Leader of One Thousand from Bahar, had secluded himself within the office. He had been pouring over the directive from Viceroy of Bahar, Amil Wardka for some time, and his expression was extremely grim.

“As of now we are to hold this position to buy time? We aren’t supposed to advance on Madress!? Where is the need to waste time indecisively!? Aaaah, this is no different from Falid’s suggestion, what an infuriating kid!!”

“Captain, I apologise for intruding whilst you were busy.”

“You’re late! When do you think I called for you!? Are the trashy plebs rubbing off on you, you bastard!?”

“Captain, we should stop speaking of trash. They are, for the moment, our allies.”

“What’s wrong with calling garbage what it is!?”

“Well, for the moment please remain composed. There are all kinds here. Ah, I have something to report on the search for Ned, and a report on Grohl’s wife and child.”

“Start with Grohl’s wife and child! They’ve been captured as planned right!?”

“Eh, well, we were able to pinpoint their location. The failures in the pursuit party lost them, and they completely escaped. We’ll have to postpone the plan to use them as leverage.”

“Shit! We can’t use the recruits from Coimbra after all! How did they escape when we were so close behind them!?”

“Well, the scouts were following regular soldiers after all. What else could be expected of former serfs? It’s true that Coimbra is full of pathetic soldiers.”

The wife and child had been sent there in preparation for the uprising. The capture of the two was supposed to be flawless. That said, capturing them could only be good and so Ristih would have been grateful if it did succeed, but wasn’t too upset about how it failed.

“So, do you know where Ned went? We haven’t had contact from him yet.”

“We went to the fort that idiot Ned had been talking about, but all we found were some brutalised corpses.”

“Whose corpses?”

“Inside the fort, only Ned and the Baharans were found. They’d all been completely slaughtered. It was the doing of an incredibly prodigious soldier.”

“Hmm… so the woman and child were hidden there after all. It was Grohl’s family we were after, so an elite guard wasn’t entirely out of the question.”

“Although Ned was quite skilled, his opponent this time was on another level. This is Coimbra so there is a danger of underestimating them too much.”

Two of the dead were missing their heads, and Ned had his top and bottom halves separated. There was no mistaking that they had been killed by a master; most likely one of the Coimbra Guard.

“If that’s true, I too will have to work on not underestimating them. We’re up against a powerful rival here.”

Ned was somewhat frivolous but that did not diminish the impressiveness of defeating him; therefore, the new strategy involved selecting more ex-Coimbra

soldiers. They might not be the most disciplined troops, but taking advantage of every possibility was the Bahar Military's speciality. Geb's rough words had been a result of his new responsibility of supervising the new additions. Ristih himself held some doubts, but had to follow Amil's plan.

"There are traces of a battle near the exit of a hidden passageway. The remaining corpses were Coimbra soldiers, and the other three Baharans. It seems like the Baharans were targeted. One of the ones with Ned probably betrayed them and ran."

"Do you think they still haven't noticed the Bahar presence on their own?"

"Ned used to be in Coimbra's army after all. If one of the Coimbrans there recognised him it wouldn't be strange. At that point if they hadn't been found out it would have been ridiculous."

Geb had a devil's intuition and spoke his hypothesis. It was possible that Ned himself had accidentally said something about it although there were no traces of torture. To die instantly rather than risk giving up military intelligence wasn't uncommon.

"This has gotten bad then. If this spreads as a rumor it might bring down the Red Circle Army all at once. They are but a gathering of beasts after all."

There was no definite proof. With any number of witnesses, the Baharans were all killed in action by the fort. Bahar had stuck to the shadows and would not likely be found out officially, but rumors needed no proof. From person to person the tale would be embellished until the Baharans had to lose their heads, such was the terror of a rumor.

"I wonder about that. When the people of the Red Circle Army triumph they taste blood and vice, right? After this they won't think too much of morals and justice. Don't make light of beasts on the scent of blood."

"That makes sense, I hadn't thought of that."

"What is important is to attack, attack, attack, and keep up the pressure. Move on to the next place quickly so as not to have to think on the depraved creatures."

To conquer any place, with any number of troops, would display great power. Unfortunately, each battle would whittle away at the troops' morale. Particularly with the Red Circle Army, the possibility of it dissolving was ever present. If they woke

from the stupor of beasthood, they would once again know the fear of death, and would likely act to spare their own lives; such was humanity.

“Earlier, from Bahar, a terrible directive was received. We’re to stay in Rockbell and lengthen the time of the rebellion. The orders are to halt the advance on Madress.”

“Those were some sudden directives… well, Amil is allowed to say what he pleases. But still, why now?”

“I bet that bastard Falid’s been whispering nonsense into his ear. He’s getting carried away just for being childhood friends with the inexperienced Amil! He’s made himself a ghost of power!!”

Ristih spat his words even as he concealed his jealousy. If the target of his abuse had been there he would have made it a shouting match. Ristih’s king was Viceroy of Bahar, Amil Wardka. He was the most promising youth in the empire and was aiming to succeed the emperor. Ristih himself had accepted the wisdom in his bid, and had not only sworn an oath of loyalty, but was also truly allied to him in his heart. His only problem was with the redheaded Falid who had known Amil since childhood. Accomplished in both literary and military arts, attractive in both face and figure, proficient in both level-headedness and fortitude, he was grounded in perfection. Popular with soldiers, he steadily gained meritorious achievements, and rose in rank when the opportunity presented itself.

Amil had already ascended to being a Senior Leader of One Thousand, surpassing Ristih. That he would rise to become a Great General, Viceroy, and ultimately Emperor was a popular opinion. After all, he was a product of Emperor Befnam’s ‘Operation Daybreak’. None doubted his competency. Falid would most likely become Amil’s right hand man. Ristih could not accept that. For the past 20 years, it had been none other than Ristih who had worked to the bone. He had undergone many hardships and trained in the Bahar military which was famously difficult to please. Ristih had played a major role in the disruption of a dangerous rebellion before either Amil or Falid had been born.

Bahar’s acting Great General was close to retirement, and he strongly thought himself to be the one to take up the position. His goal was only natural. He didn’t know much about operation daybreak, but he knew better than to look down on the people who survived the suspicious project. For people of Bahar, their pride would not allow such a mistake. He had applied for leadership of the Coimbra rebellion in hopes of

promotion. If he could brilliantly capture the capital, he'd receive the foremost of honours from Amil himself.

I will make Coimbra fall! Don't think you can get in my way Falid!!

That which was before his eyes was something he had to bear. Successfully concealing his murderous thoughts, Ristih slammed his fist onto his desk. It was true, however, that if the war bogged down, it would provide pretext for the Bahar military to intervene. They would suitably resist, and eventually capitulate so that Grohl's responsibility for the situation could be investigated. It was certainly an easily attainable goal, but if he only did that much, he wouldn't be accomplishing any meritorious deeds. Conversely, if the Red Circle Army smashed the capital, Grohl's inefficiency would most likely be called into discussion. After that, when Bahar intervened, the rebels would honourably surrender the castle unto them. Then the Red Circle Army would be painted as the bringers of justice, with their leader Ristih becoming a hero. It might make his path to Viceroy of Coimbra more than just one of dreams; his fame would echo throughout the world.

For the moment, the current plan was received from the most influential man in the Horsheido empire. Amil had contacted the emperor with his plans in advance. To preemptively carve out a cancerous growth, he wished to remove his own older brother from his position of power. Having learned of the proposal, the Emperor made a snap decision, and left Amil with the directive to show off his own prowess. It was a test to see if he was worthy of becoming the next emperor. Success would mean Amil's inauguration as crown prince.

"So then, captain, what shall we do? If we stay here, we won't be able to fully repair the walls. Not only would it be a great feat of endurance, but we'd also need to import high quality materials."

"I know that, our original plans called for the toppling of Madress. Our opponent is the stupid Grohl in the weak Coimbra, and we even have those who betrayed him. We can't influence the war much with only a few competent people. If I was in command, we'd most certainly win. We're only a small force, but it would hardly be difficult!"

During the unification wars, the Bahar province fought soldiers from the Gemb province who were led by the Sun God, and fiercely resisted; the weight of history on their shoulders. The Baharan cavalry was mightier than the Sun God who knew of defeat that day. Although the fortunes of war had not favoured them, and they

eventually were forced to surrender, that their resistance had been the most effective on the continent was soon widely known. For such reasons, they still greatly revered that resistance, even during the time that Amil became viceroy, they maintained their vigilance.

In one step, Coimbra, with its goods and soldiers, was defeated, and it surrendered quickly. There were still legends of Coimbrans begging for their lives pitifully; their sorry nature and the scorn that came with it bought them a new fame. It was a country that, whilst frivolously passing the time, was crushed by the violent wars brought down upon them by the Sun God. 'They may have gold, but they don't have men,' were words describing the state of Coimbra. For Ristih, who was from Bahar, Coimbra was hardly a thing to be feared. All the more when they were led by the likes of Grohl.

"In short, is it alright to continue preparations for the march?"

"Of course! Don't worry about the homeland, when we take the capital, without a doubt, we will contact Amil and present it to him!"

"Then choose the men who are suitable for leadership and gather them up. Return with a report when you are finished."

Geb, whose emotions were written across his face, diligently saluted and left.

If security is truly one's greatest enemy, we must work diligently to turn that threat aside. Let me see, that's right, we'll have to do it well. Even against the incompetent Grohl, and the weak Coimbra military, the majority of our forces are from Coimbra as well. So long as they are humans, they can't be too different.

That way of thinking was also important. It was unclear if Ristih who had raised a rebellion and taken it pillaging to the uttermost limits would actually hand over the province to Amil. If he performed poorly, he was to be cut off like the tail of a lizard. He may not have yet realised that fact, or he may have been pretending not to know.

While roughly stroking his beard, Geb decided that he would sort out the lordly affairs later. Now that his task had been completed, he'd seize a woman, and drown his sorrows in wine. If his forces failed later it didn't matter.

Well, as I thought, the captain will have to take responsibility if this fails. It will all end if I just say that it was Ristih's plan all along. That's a good trick for living longer.

He remembered the face of Noel who had asked him about the methods of achieving happiness. He didn't know where she was, but had the feeling that the next time they met, it would be as foes. It was his soldier's intuition. Ned was close to a victory of his own when he met his tragic fate. In other words, it was not good enough to ascend to near perfect victory.

"Ah, I didn't get to teach her the full meaning of it all. Next time we meet, I'll properly tell her."

Even victory is mere vanity when death arrives. For Geb, surviving was a victory. Be it winning and living, or simply surviving, both were the same.

What I think, is that avoiding death is a win. So as not to die, one must fight, and acquire money. That's the trick to living with happiness.

He made a mental note to tell that to Noel before she died. If he were to be called a liar on the verge of his own death, it would make his chances of awakening lower.

Fraser, from the same village, would likely be pin Noel down by force. When she saw how he and Kraft had become, he wondered how she would react. Geb's heart leapt as he imagined the ways in which her aloof and noble face would contort when confronted with the situation. Whether she would cry, be enraged, or fall into despair, he had no clue. Either way it would be entertaining.

"Ah, I'm really looking forward to that."

Coimbra, Madress Castle.

The castle's west bank transitioned into a beach, and a large harbour was built there. In all other directions sprawled vast swaths of castle town, and many wonders remained from its days as the largest trade city of the continent. It was largely unaffected by the ramshackle defences, and wanton destruction of the war. The northern mines had run dry, and the trade with Mundonovo had been interrupted, yet as long as there were people and food, trade would continue. The rebellion may have even driven refugees into the city. With the approaching crisis directly in front of their eyes, the people did almost nothing out of the ordinary. A result of this was the capital appearing fairly prosperous.

“So this is Coimbra province’s Madress. It really is a massive city.”

“Now isn’t the time to be leisurely. We must quickly make our report to the viceroy. The situation is urgent.”

Cynthia poked Noel with a stick. A messenger had already delivered the basic information, but the circumstances obligated them to report the details of the situation in person. When they had joined with the reinforcements, the news of Rockbell’s fall had already been reported. The commanding Great General Gaddis had been unexpectedly cautious about the number of enemies, and he was already planning for his own retirement. Though they rushed on the way to Rockbell, it had already fallen by the time they had arrived, and its lord was already dead. So when they had successfully retrieved the viceroy’s wife and child, who had been saved from the worst of it, they felt no need to hurry back. A party in their rear was serving as a screen for the main body. Cynthia’s own party had joined up with the main force, and in several days time had returned to safety.

“Be sure to come back. When I’ve returned, I’ll receive my reward, okay. That was the promise you know.”

“What are you talking about, you are coming too. You are the one who killed Ned, and you’re also a witness to his talk about Bahar. You need to report to the viceroy from your own mouth th…”

Cynthia cut off her own words after only getting that far because Noel’s presentability had become horrible. She was wearing armour as the reinforcements had not prepared any spare woman’s clothing. They weren’t a part of the expedition and so their resupply had been minimal. As expected they had prepared a lovely set of clothes for Lady Sarah, but there was no portion for Noel; they did manage to secure her some underwear however. The current Noel was wearing a bloodstained leather cuirass, a bident was on her back, and a war hammer was dangling from her belt. They had tried to rinse her off on the way back, but in the end were unable to fully erase the blood and grime.

“Hey, would it be alright if I took a little stroll through the city? There are all kinds of things to look at, and I feel like there will be many treasures to be found.”

“No. First off, we’ll have to change your clothes. Do you think you can see the viceroy dressed like that?”

“I don’t really need to meet him though. It seems like a pain.”

“Ah, be quiet! Just follow me!”

“Ah, um, what are we supposed to do?” Mirut nervously asked as the other villagers gathered behind him with similar expressions.

“For the moment, you’ll be led to the barracks. It would be best if you ate there, and recuperated. Once you’ve calmed down, be sure to think about what you plan to do from here on out.”

“What to do?” Mirut and the volunteers made confused faces.

“Whether you will stay like this, or return to your village. That place is still within the rebel army’s sphere of influence right? You will probably have to fight the remaining rebels before you can properly return.”

“No way! We won’t even be useful!”

“This province isn’t wealthy enough to support people who do nothing. The city may seem lively at first glance, but the reality is not so rosy.”

Having finished her harsh words, Cynthia turned on her heel, highhandedly dragging Noel along with her.

Arriving at the officer’s barracks, Cynthia made her way to her room. It was the prepared residence for all officers in charge of more than one hundred men. Different from the regular barracks, it had private rooms and a more sturdy construction. Originally she had lived in a mansion, but as the Edrich house didn’t have the income to afford a servant, when she had become alone, she sold the estate. It was incredibly lonely for her to live alone in a large mansion, and so she moved into the barracks during her training. Although she knew it would give her the reputation of a fallen noble, as the entire province had fallen on hard times, she didn’t mind it. She half smiled, half grimaced at her situation.

“This is my room, hurry up and enter.”

“Excuse me.”

“It isn’t like I don’t own anything so be sure to show some restraint. Quickly get changed, and we’ll head off to the castle.”

“I, I get it, please let go.”

Noel had entered the room having been dragged in. She saw a fluffy seeming, pure white bed, a frugal desk, and a large wardrobe. Beside it hung things like helmets and armour. Somehow finding herself worked up, Noel flung herself to the bed she was facing. Regrettably, her hair was caught, preventing her from reaching her fluffy goal. Just before the bed, she was held back. Having been pulled from behind, her head was at a strange angle, and she stopped there for some time.

“It hurts, you know.”

“Well, I don’t want you flinging yourself onto the bed with your current appearance.”

“Its fluffiness is making me tired.”

“Your biggest mistake was being so horribly dirty! You idiot!!”

“Can I sleep for a little while?”

“No!”

Being forcibly held back by Cynthia’s hands, Noel made small unconscious noises as she made longing eyes at the bed. She swore to any god that was listening that she would succeed in her second attempt, although she would most likely never be forgiven for doing so. As she feared, there was no god.

“Ah, my head might break.”

Although Noel complained, Cynthia was hearing none of it.

“You aren’t employed by the military, but for the moment why don’t we put you in a military uniform? You did participate as a volunteer soldier. This is one I received when I was only in charge of about ten. It’s a bit long though…”

Saying that, she handed over a white uniform. It wasn’t the uniform of a high rank, and so had no shoulder strap; however, it did have the Coimbra scale. The trading city had a proud insignia. One side held golden coins, and the other weighed goods.

Cynthia had been quickly promoted to leading one hundred, and so her uniform from her time in charge of ten was as good as new. Although they wore armour on campaign and on the battlefield, the uniform was used for all other occasions, and in recent years hardly any battles, or even bandit subjugation, had occurred.

“Um?”

“I’m only lending it to you. We are meeting the viceroy, and cannot do him any discourtesy.”

“I know. Hey, these look good. Don’t they have good style?”

Saying such things, Noel threw off her dirty garments. Although she should have had some trouble with an outfit she was unused to, Noel managed to quickly and nimbly change into it. She didn’t at all look like the sort to have practice with that kind of thing, so how she managed it was mysterious. She dressed not with the fumblings of a new recruit, but like a recently promoted female officer. With a serious expression, and a gallant air, she inclined her head after she was fully dressed.

“Hey, do I look good?”

“Y-yeah.”

Cynthia watched without thinking as Noel approached the desk and took something in hand. What had been drawing her gaze, she without hesitation took up in a tight grasp. They were the glasses worn by Cynthia’s late brother. Not like a person taking a souvenir, but rather more like an abandoned child, she appreciated the frame.

“Take that, and tie my hair behind my head. There, do I look good?”

Wearing the black rimmed glasses, with her hair tied behind her head, she turned around. From every angle she looked like military personnel. She appeared to be an efficient secretary or staff officer. Anyone who didn’t know who was inside that shell would easily be deceived. Even knowing what was inside it, Cynthia felt she was being fooled somehow.

“…”

“Um, this time…”

“What is this, you suddenly straightened up.”

“Sir Cynthia, your orders. The preparations are well in order.”

“W-what is this all of a sudden…”

“There is nothing particular about it, it is just my way to cope. Please leave everything to me. Well then, excuse me for today.”

With a sage expression, in the manner of a bureaucrat, she pushed up her glasses, turned, and briskly left. For Cynthia, this was the biggest shock of them all.

“W-wait! Don’t just deal with this on your own! And what’s with those glasses!?”

“Aw, and I thought it was going well.”

“Appearance is good and all, but you need to do something about your inner self! You idiot!”

Cynthia shouted, and Noel covered her ears with both hands. The grossly inappropriate stance she took whilst in the form of a reliable staff officer gave birth to a whole new type of unease for Cynthia to feel.

“Hey, more importantly, can you give me these glasses?”

“What are you saying all of a sudden?”

“Because I was going to get a reward. I think these glasses are really pretty.”

Wavering for but a moment, she decided that there was no reason not to, or rather, as it wasn’t expensive she had reason to rejoice. If she didn’t honour the deal, there was no telling what Noel would do, but it was certain she would do something; maybe even involving a hammer in one hand, and a bident in the other. Flashing her teeth, Noel attempted to drive her into a corner. Without realising it, shivers ran down her spine, and to clear her thoughts she coughed.

“I would like to say that it is no good, but a promise is a promise. Do what you will.”

“Yes! I’ll treasure it. With these on, I look smart right? They’re glasses that make me smart, the curious glasses.”

“Oi, don’t tell me that’s why you put them on…”

“Yup. The world looks amazing. It really is clearly visible now.”

Cynthia was going to tell her that of course the glasses would do that, but they had little time.

“That’s good. While you were fiddling around we ran out of time, so hurry up and go. I’ll warn you in advance: do not say anything rude to the viceroy. I will only speak in response to questions.”

“I get… no, I understand Sir Cynthia. Please leave everything to me.”

With her manners prepared, her body felt itchy.

“Please stop making fun of me. Next time I think I’ll pinch your cheek again.”

“Why? I even used proper speech…”

“Silence, I absolutely will!”

“It can’t be helped then. I get it Cynthia.”

Arrogantly patting her shoulder, Noel walked ahead by herself. Even the Great General couldn’t match her confidence. Sitting a moment longer, half in protest, Cynthia yet again released a sigh, unable to understand Noel, she stood up and followed after her.

Chapter 8
Icarus' Dream

The capital of Coimbra, Madress Castle.

Grohl's jeering echoed through the room during the audience. The red faced middle aged man who knelt before him was none other than the commander of the punitive force, Gaddis. His social status was equal to Wilm's and he was a reliable man due to his aptitude for effective strategies.

"You fool! Why did you think I sent you ahead!? Was it not so you could protect Rockbell from the rebels!?!?"

"With all due respect, viceroy. We had to clear a path for each day's march. With the time we had, nobody could have made it before Rockbell fell."

Gaddis seemed like he was on the verge of anger, but he desperately endured whilst explaining his actions. Insulted by a young man who had never before commanded troops in front of the other retainers, his face strained as his pride as a commander was wounded.

"Is that the way a commander of ten thousand speaks!? What I was asking was why you didn't recapture Rockbell! You failure, nice try flapping your tongue into excuses!"

"Then I will tell you. Count Barel was already dead, and the population was completely suppressed; however, the silver lining is that we were able to rescue Lady Sarah and the young prince. It was best to immediately fall back and prepare for the coming rebels. A prolonged forced march would only tire out the men, and I made the decision to avoid an unsustainable assault."

Gaddis had only been in control of three thousand, and the Red Circle Army had around five thousand. They could get reinforcements from elsewhere in the province, but there was also a need to consider the fatigue of the men, and the fortified enemy. Their opponents had also proven to be much more effective in battle than what had been anticipated from the disorganised rabble that they were. Grohl only half-heartedly acknowledged that. All he wanted was to see the rebel forces retreat. It was

unknown how far from reality his thoughts were. Causing a rebellion was the greatest shame, and the highly conceited Grohl could not bear it.

“What pathetic reasoning. It is under your command that the Coimbra military gained a reputation for weakness. Listen well, Elgar, this cowardly senility must never be tolerated!” he firmly declared to comfort Elgar who was not looking well beside him.

To prepare the twelve year old who was to one day become the viceroy, he sometimes participated in meetings. So as not to damage relations with Gaddis, for he did not yet know him, and because he did not know what to say, Elgar responded ambiguously. On the other hand, Gaddis had already been insulted, and had his explanations spat upon. His cautious approach had not been in self interest.

“Viceroy, please wait! I have not behaved as one who has lost his nerve! To ensure our victory I…”

“Next up are our soldiers! I don’t need a commander who hesitates like a brigand! You should retire!”

“Viceroy, that isn’t…”

“How verbose!”

“Yes my lord.”

Grohl roared, interrupting Gaddis’ words, sending him back to the end of the row of retainers which had lined up. Everyone could see that he was trembling with rage and shame as he quickly strode to his place. After checking on Gaddis with a sidelong glance, Wilm took one step forward and gave his report.

“Viceroy, here is the guard responsible for bringing Lady Sarah to safety, Commander of One Hundred, Cynthia Edrich. This is the report of the aforementioned situation. Would it be acceptable to summon her?”

“Yes, I don’t care. Hurry and bring her.”

Grohl nodded, and the guards opened the solemn door for Cynthia who tensely entered with Noel. At the meeting, only the most high ranking officials of the province were allowed to be there so Cynthia had no experience in such lofty affairs. The lowest among them were senior commanders of one thousand, and so proposing anything

was absolutely forbidden. Present were the two at the top of the military, ones who could directly advise the viceroy, Gaddis and Wilm. There could even have been officials capable of hastening promotions. In the first place, all those with direct access to Grohl had already been awarded great things in the past. What ruined Cynthia's mood was that any one of them could lightly remove her from her position.

They were there under the pretext of explaining the situation, but it may have been about questioning the guard's ability to protect the woman and child. It was as nerve wracking as her first time accompanying the quiet Sarah. He was the eldest son of the great house of Waldek, and the one who was once the first in line for the throne so worrying whether he would respond positively or negatively caused Cynthia to become stiff. Conscious of the gazes from the line of retainers, Cynthia walked before Grohl and dropped to one knee. Noel too, took up a similar attitude from slightly beside and behind her. There was a vague sense that she was having fun, but for the moment it was subdued.

"C-Cynthia E-e, Edrich, Co-Commander of One Hundred. T-tasked with the important duty of protecting Lady Sarah and the young prince, the c-c-clumsy mismanagement of…"

The tightly wound Cynthia's rapid words were interrupted by Grohl's sarcastic laugh.

"Wait, wait. We aren't here to question the responsibility of your guards. Although Sarah did suffer a wound, she was returned safely, and my son Elgar returned with no serious wounds at all. Do not be ashamed of your Edrich house as I have heard that you did a praiseworthy job. You have done justice to the term guard."

"A-a, ah, I, I, I most humbly accept your honourable words!"

She desperately fumbled her way through expressing her gratitude. Now that the fear of being held responsible for any failures had passed, Cynthia took a deep breath to calm herself down.

"Now then, you seem to have something to directly report to me. Don't hold back, tell me."

"Yes, the truth is, um, that is, at Se-sepdef fort, th-the one called N-Noel, that is, um, ah, sh-she…"

The words she had gathered up to summarise the events became intracranial butterflies, causing the words flowing from her mouth to become unintelligible. She knew that the retainers were leaking smirks, and furthermore she hadn't a clue why it was happening to her. For some reason her surroundings began to spin, and from one knee her body began to tremble. Checking again, her mouth still wasn't working correctly. The figure of Grohl raising an eyebrow in her field of vision caused the world around her to spiral even faster as despair filled her very being.

Seeing this, with a stern look, Wilm warned, "Cynthia, Commander of One Hundred, there is nothing to be so nervous about. This is about the events which happened earlier; now is the time to report to the viceroy. You are an honoured member of the Coimbra military, be proud as a person of knightly status. Regardless of the situation it is unbecoming to lose composure!"

"Yes sir, of course!"

Although she had answered with vigour, her mind was already blank. Just what exactly she was to say, or where she was to go with it, she had absolutely no idea. Normally she would have carefully prepared her report before hand, but getting Noel presentable had taken all of her available time. With things having turned out how they had, she regretted not writing what she needed to say down beforehand. Boiling inside her head were desperate attempts to formulate summarial sentences. Nothing settled at all.

Several, no some tens of seconds later, as the dreaded silence flowed through the room, somebody lightly patted Cynthia's left shoulder. Turning to look without thinking, she saw Noel, with glasses on, quickly wink with an elated expression.

"With her fear, I find myself worried about Sir Cynthia's ability to report; however, it contains some things which must be said. Would it be acceptable, therefore, if I received the honour of continuing?"

"Who might you be?"

Noel answered Wilms question after saluting.

"Sir, I was promoted to volunteer soldier by Sir Cynthia, I am Noel from the village of Zoim. So that the viceroy would reward us for our actions, I took command of the other villagers and we hastened to join the Coimbra forces. For convenience, I have

temporarily borrowed the uniform of one in charge of ten. Please forgive me of this much."

Noel stated a heavily embellished version of the truth. Cynthia could only widen her eyes as she wondered from whose mouth did that statement come. Elgar, who understood the situation, found his mouth ajar as he was made speechless in shock. It was unavoidable that she looked like a completely different person. At first he hadn't even recognised it was Noel. With her characteristic red hair, and facial expressions, there was little doubt that it was her. It was the real Noel, but that only confused him even more.

"There is no problem with that, but this means we now have volunteer reinforcements if that is the case. It is difficult to suddenly believe that though. Is this true Cynthia?"

Grohl had a doubtful expression. He was aware of how unpopular he was with the populace. It wasn't only Grohl, but the lined up retainers and civil officials all made similar faces for it was a well known fact that Grohl did not enjoy the trust of his people.

"I-it is. Um, well, without mistake, it is true."

It was most likely true, as given how nervous Cynthia was, she would have most likely confessed had it been false. She couldn't bring herself to say that they had once been rebels but due to the circumstances had happened to switch sides. Furthermore, even though she felt about to burst, her mouth would not say that she had lost in single combat to the northern girl. If word got around that a commander of one hundred lost a fight with a commoner, the already poor reputation of the Coimbra military would further plummet, so with heart wrenching thoughts, Cynthia continued her big lie. For Cynthia who was not a person to tell lies, it showed in the form of pain on her face, but fortunately nobody noticed.

"What a thing to say. Among the province, not all of the people were ungrateful? Did you hear that Wilm?"

At the news of unanticipated reinforcements, Grohl's expression unexpectedly loosened. He knew most of the populace hated him. He had exhausted himself trying to reverse the situation, but all of his efforts had backfired. Grohl's temperament was unfortunate, but a tyrant he was not. Whether or not he was any good at governing was another matter, however.

“Yes. Your continued benevolence and governing has reached the hearts of a few of the people. This Wilm is most impressed. This is surely the proof that we have been on the correct path.”

“I had continued to fight the rumors that the Sun God had not blessed us, but this seems to have helped a little. Now, Noel, exactly what was it that Cynthia was too nervous to report? I don’t mind, tell me without reserve.”

“Sir, this is a report on the high probability that Baharans are participating in the current rebellion.”

“What was that?”

“For that reason, Sir Cynthia has hesitated so. Whatever happens, it is an important matter to report.”

At Noel’s words, in one moment, the room filled in an uproar. For an instant, Grohl’s face went pale, then his expression changed and he stood.

“Baharans! So the Baharans, no, Amil is behind this rebellion!?”

“Don’t do anything rash! Our relations with Bahar may be chilly, but we are still brethren serving the great Horsheido empire! So why can they not help but attempt to deceive us!? Noel, you had better not be lying!”

As one officer raised his voice, instantly, the civil officials rebutted.

“But if we rethink our relations, we have nothing to gain! It is no lie that we have put great efforts into relations before!”

“Can you quiet down!? Viceroy, please calm yourself! Noel, state the grounds for what you have said! This is a place for the viceroy and high ranking officials, if what you have said is something like a lie or a joke, that is inexcusable!”

After turning to the room and raising his voice, Wilm gave Noel a stern glare.

“T-this is m-my turn to report!”

Cynthia rose and stood. After all the noise had lifted, it became possible to think calmly. Nervously, but without error, she explained what had happened up until that

point. Although she was pushed to the limit, the rebels had advanced on the unknown Sebtem fort. Among them was Neddicas, who had been in charge of ten in Coimbra, but had fled to Bahar and several of them had Baharan accents. It was something he had not only attempted to kill Cynthia to keep secret, but also some of his own subordinates.

“How could they? As I thought, any way you look at it, this is Amil’s doing! How vulgar of him to attempt to trick his own elder brother to his own advantage! He brings shame to the great house of Waldek.”

“Please wait! It is dangerous to trust what they have said. It is mere speculation that Bahar is behind this all, we don’t have any definite proof!”

Wilm risked his life to ease the tension. What Noel and Cynthia were saying was completely true, but he could not afford to overlook it. Normally that kind of thing would not be instantly believed, but Grohl was different.

“Definitive proof you say? So far this has all been enough reason to believe it though! What do you think they’ve been doing up until now!”

The one who had taken trade with the southern islands from Coimbra in conjunction with Ribeldam had been none other than Amil. On top of all that, it had been recorded by their father Befnam, further spoke against Amil. Because of that, he had lost his place as next in line for the throne, and gained instead infamy. Even though he was his younger brother, he held a hatred for him that could not be sated even by killing him many times over.

“Viceroy, we do not need reckless action. I don’t understand from where you have heard of this.”

“I am Emperor Befnam’s son, his firstborn Grohl Wardka! Why hold back for my brother!?”

“Pardon me. I had simply wanted definitive proof, would it be acceptable to capture the rebel leader Ristih? He should without a doubt have some information. He may even be a knight from Bahar.”

At those simple words, Noel’s mouth curved in amusement. Her expression which was overflowing with confidence did not look like one of a volunteer soldier, but rather like a tactician watching a well planned trap sprung. Her glasses gleamed in the light,

reflecting a subtle radiance. She had an intimidating air which was not at all like one of a young girl.

Wilm, however, unexpectedly responded under the pressure, “Just one soldier, no, a commoner shouldn’t speak like that! The Bahar province is famous, vigourous, and has great fortitude; its military has dauntless courage. That respect is impossible to attain through lies! Do not speak so poorly of Bahar’s ruling Viceroy Amil!”

“Whoever our opponent is, they will obviously have to take responsibility for it. We will capture Ristih and torture him until the truth is brought to light. There will be no problems. He will be judged for his sins,” speaking thus, Noel again took a knee.

“It is as Noel has said. Once Ristih is captured, everything will be made clear. If what she says is true, she will be rewarded!”

“V-viceroy!”

“Wilm, Rockbell must be recaptured first. You can also come with me. Have the troops been fully assembled?”

“Y-yes, sir!”

“Gaddis, I entrust the defence of the capital Madress to you! A second failure is not allowed, carefully carry out your duty !”

“U-understood, sir!”

Gaddis expressed his comprehension and left the room.

“Cynthia, thank you for your good work. I will be sure to reward you later. From now on, I expect you to work hard for the sake of Coimbra.”

“I apologise for my earlier manner of speech!”

Cynthia bowed deeply. She was full of relief that her audience was coming to a close. Nothing could compare with how she felt.

“Now, Noel, from what I’ve seen, you are a rather self-respecting individual. If you are okay with it, would you like to become a leader of ten in the Coimbra military? Of

course there are no problems with wanting to return to your old life in the village. We would compensate you with a different reward that way."

"I would love to, thank you very much."

"Then you may retire for the day. You've done a great service."

"Yes, sir. Then shall we go sightseeing, sir Cynthia."

Removing her glasses, loosening her expression, Noel reached out to Cynthia's hand. It was an elegant motion as though offering her a dance. Cynthia scowled as she took the offered hand and stood, and the two of them left the room together. Watching them leave, Grohl forgot his earlier rage, and found himself laughing unexpectedly.

"This world sure has some strange girls. Don't you agree, Wilm?"

"Yes. I have never seen ones like this before; such is the nature of humanity. I've lived a long life, eh?"

"To match you, a dignified great general, she's a courageous one. Didn't she also seem capable and intelligent? She is a truly interesting girl."

"Remember that as we do not know her history, we must not let our guard down. I cannot think that she is a simple village girl. For the moment, caution is necessary."

"I get it, I get it, you're overanxious, aren't you."

While outwardly responding to the conversation, Wilm's inner thoughts kept strong vigilance. It would be easy to underestimate her as a simple young girl, but he felt from her an unpleasant premonition. Her eyes which seemed to peer well beyond her years, carried a sense that they saw through all. There were times when Wilm had to change his mind. After fifty years of life, he had become perceptive and hardworking, and he had cultivated his eye for people. It was that sense which was violently ringing alarm bells. He had to be sure to absolutely never be deceived by her appearance. It was highly likely that under a human's skin, something else lurked inside of her.

But, how much of the plan did she discover, and what could a mere leader of ten do? Without bringing along social status with her, her work could never accomplish much.

As though to vomit out his unease, he breathed deeply to calm himself down. If he could somehow bring her over to his side that would be good. From what he saw she would be the type to understand what he had to say. She seemed to be the kind of girl who would take advantage of anything profitable. That type of person would never board a sinking ship. They would not value high morals, justice, or other such things.

The most troubling ones were those obsessed with hatred. That type wouldn't listen to words, and could at any time do something unnecessary, often aggravating situations. The best example he could come up with was the viceroy Grohl. While thinking to himself, Wilm's cold gaze looked out before him.

"It seems that the meeting has ended. Everyone, we don't have much time, hurry and prepare for the day we take the field. Our next battle must absolutely not end in a loss."

Responding to his words, the retainers quietly left.

"Father, I have a request. A once in a lifetime request."

"Why are you being so formal Elgar? Also, isn't it rare for you to try to coax something out of me? I don't need to say this, but it is alright to just tell me. If it is within my abilities I will grant your request."

The viceroy, with the expression of a father leaned in towards his son happily.

"If Noel is to serve Coimbra, could she become my subordinate?"

"You want Noel as your subordinate?"

"Yes, other than that, I don't need anything. I just wanted her to be my subordinate. This is a once in a lifetime wish, and I won't make another one like it, father," Elgar implored with a serious face.

More than anything it was what he wanted. He thought of the hammer which she had seized and used, and that she had been quickly used as a decoy and had the bravery to survive and return. Later she returned, easily mistakable for a staff officer. He wondered which one was the true Noel, he wanted to know no matter what. He had unknowingly become fascinated by her and her carefree attitude which was sometimes masked by an alien form.

“If it is that, you don’t even need to plead for it. Is that really a suitable wish?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“You are the man who will inherit Coimbra; no, if possible, the empire. At that time, all the retainers will serve you. Noel too.”

“That’s right.”

“You don’t need to rush. Train yourself and become a man who will lose to no one. Before that day comes, to the best of my ability, I will clear all obstacles before you to build up a solid foundation for your future. I will bare all of the people’s wrath. The one who will change Coimbra, will be you Elgar.”

With those words Grohl strongly smoothed Elgar’s hair, a mix of resolution and resignation on his face. Elgar affirmed his words and accepted his silent father’s hand.

“What is this? The viceroy heard only lies! For such a horrible sin one should be thrown in jail! But Sir Wilm, that he would use such language! Who do you think you are!?”

Dragging her away as though to throw her in prison, Cynthia grilled Noel. Her brow was wrinkled, and a vein bulged on her forehead.

“I wasn’t thinking…”

“Be serious, you idiot!!”

Seriously an unbelievable woman! In front of the viceroy, even the dust should be nervous!

She had frantically worried about how to introduce Noel, but then she brazenly spread lies. With her smooth tongue and confident air, there was not a person who would have doubted her. It seemed like she had just thought of something, and quickly after a mischievous smile floated across her face, she smothered it with a serious expression.

“C-Cynthia Edrich, Commander of One Hundred here~. T-this journey with Lady Sarah and the young prince is isht charanchara…”

Noel rattled off her Cynthia imitations whilst standing stiffly. Even minor muscle spasms were recreated, and she magnificently reenacted the earlier events.

“T-that is in imitation of me!? What a deflection!”

With her face completely red, clutching her uniform just above the stomach, Noel’s expression slowly paled in response. She had been too engrossed in teasing and had forgotten to secure an escape rout.

“T-this is awkward. C-Cynthia, I, I just suddenly thought to help you with some troublesome things is all,” Noel used swindler’s words.

“Silence, don’t ‘just suddenly’ me!”

“It’s painfwul…”

Noel surrendered with both hands, and Cynthia’s anger dispersed. She felt foolish herself for having expressed her anger through physical force.

“Now then, what are you going to do!?”

“What will I do, about what?”

“As I was saying, you know, what the viceroy said about entering the army or returning to your village!”

With those words she released Noel, and took a moment to breath and calm down. From the start, her status as a volunteer soldier had been just a title, and was only provisional until the guards had completed their mission. Noel and the others had technically been relieved from service. For Noel who had stated her intentions, it seemed that she wished to join the military. She was the kind of person to cause all sorts of trouble with her unbridled carefree attitude, but her prowess in battle was undeniable, and her head seemed mostly to work correctly.

If she asked the person herself, Cynthia felt that she would get a: ‘because I had my curious glasses on’ style non-answer. To put it plainly, Noel was a person she could not understand. They were both women, however, and seemed to be no more than four years apart in age. Of course, their ability to get on the same wavelength from time to time was inhibited by their incompatible personalities. If anything, she felt that it might be fine if things stayed that way.

“Yup, I wonder what I’ll do.”

“You wonder what you’ll do, aren’t you fine with whatever.”

“It doesn’t matter where I am, or what I do so long as I find happiness~.”

“Ha… Think more seriously about your own affairs.”

Cynthia was amazed. Joining the military came with all kinds of restrictions, but food wouldn’t be a problem. Once the rebellion was put down it would become a relatively stable career, although her life would be in danger.

“Hmmm…”

“…”

If she went back to the village, she wouldn’t have to hold back. She knew the hardships of taking up the sword as a woman better than anyone. Enquiring further, she found that Noel had not originally lived in the village, and she had settled down in the middle of a journey. She didn’t really understand, but played along anyway. Either way it was possible for Noel to live a good life. She seemed to be the type of carefree girl to smile lightly in any circumstances.

“Hey, Cynthia, do you know any methods of attaining happiness?”

Noel had abruptly asked her, and although she scoffed at it initially, her serious expression pulled her in.

“The methods to becoming happy? That is so vague it becomes difficult to answer you know.”

“What I’ve heard up until now is to: eat well, sleep well, become skilled, gain many friends and companions, amass treasures, and continue winning. I have lots of others too, but many of those turned out to be no good. I’m not sure because there were so many people.”

She removed a notebook from her breast pocket to confirm.

“Hmm, for me, I haven’t thought about it much so I don’t really understand.”

“Then why did you enter the military, Cynthia? Do you like fighting?”

“It isn’t that I particularly enjoy battle. It is because I inherited my family name, and I wanted to protect its knightly status.”

She didn’t have the desire to protect the people or the province. It was for her own sake at the time, but she had kicked such vices from her heart. It was the duty of the knight to serve the province and its people.

“If I do that, will I achieve happiness?”

“No, it isn’t really for that reason.”

She was viewed as stupid by outsiders, endured scorn, and frantically trained. She could defend her pride and honour, but those and happiness were different things. In the first place, she couldn’t understand well what happiness even was. Was it to find a loving family, and raise children in a warm environment? If that was the case, wouldn’t becoming a knight have been a negative thing? Why had she even taken up the sword? She built up the strength to ask herself.

“You don’t know either, Cynthia?”

“Yeah. What is happiness? It is a complicated and difficult question. Sorry, but I don’t really know after all.”

“I see. Then let’s search together? We’ll definitely find out if we search together,” saying so, Noel held out her hand.

“B-but, I just met you.”

“That doesn’t matter. What is important is the opportunity, the opportunity you know. It’s been like that from the start.”

Noel quickly urged her to shake hands, and Cynthia considered while looking at it.

“What is important is the opportunity, eh?”

“Yup. Ah, but I can’t do everything by myself so look after me well, okay. That’s it, that’s it, undefeatable invulnerability and the like. It’s not a huge goal.”

“Then, from that undefeatable invulnerability, a big one will come, eh? You did say to continue winning, but that isn’t a simple thing. Firstly this undefeatable invulnerability, I don’t think either of us would be qualified to speak about it so lightly…”

“As I said, we’ll stick together. Come on, Captain Cynthia.”

She seemed exceedingly buoyant as she spouted words; truly a carefree individual. As expected this was the original, and the other facade had been acting. It must have been the glasses just as she claimed.

“Together with you, eh?”

“That’s right. Together we’ll aim for undefeatable invulnerability. First come the great general’s hundred victories so we’ll match it and bring about: the corps’ two hundred wins.”

“…”

Noel drolly flashed her white teeth. While she thought it was all foolishness, she had grown to find that it wasn’t entirely bad. After all there was nothing preventing her from taking the hand. It was true that increasing the number of people increased the chance of the target being found. What they could feasibly accomplish, she didn’t know, but the point was that they were acknowledging their friendship. Cynthia nodded once and grasped Noel’s right hand. She decided it was alright to ignore the small details of how things would work out in a friendship between a superior officer and a subordinate. Noel was that kind of person after all.

“I, I’ll be counting on you.”

“Yup, together we shall continue to win, and achieve happiness!”

Hearing the phrase that was similar to the words from the killer’s story earlier, Cynthia made a wry smile, then she remembered what she had to do. If she had to say, it was that moment that was the best so far.

“There is one thing I forgot to say.”

“What is it?”

“However things turn out, the fact that you helped will remain. That is, that… tentatively you have my thanks. Yeah.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it.”

“There is no way that will happen! I will seriously…”

“I see. Then always care. It doesn’t bother me.”

Noel, with a smile, grasped her glasses and flew from the room.

Author’s Note:

Noel’s treasures:

Battered picture book, bident, iron war hammer with blood and dirt, the military uniform she received from Cynthia, the glasses that make her smarter.

Chapter 9
What Form is the Sun?

Noel received the status of a leader of ten when she came under military employ. Because it seemed that at that rate she would permanently receive the uniform which she had initially borrowed from Cynthia. Noel happily went to show it off to Mirut and the other villagers as it had already become one of her precious treasures.

Mirut and the villagers, meanwhile, had found they had become temporary soldiers until the rebellion was crushed. As it had been decidedly too dangerous to head back to the village for the moment, it was thought that they could earn their keep in the army. Their lives would be at risk, but they could accumulate some wealth, though that would be cheap compensation for their lives if they died.

The meeting to plan for the rebel army's destruction by the southern Coimbra military was still underway, so the soldiers were frantically rushing to and fro. Men reorganised to retake Rockbell, and with their commander already chosen, they proceeded to notify those he would lead.

On another note, Noel and the volunteer soldiers were temporarily placed under Cynthia. Not a single person questioned why she had accepted a young girl with minimal training, and of little fame. Leaving aside that she was a small fry as a leader of ten, although she was of the lowest caste of officers, she still had to be treated appropriately. The greatest of the troubles bundled with the volunteers was that it would be difficult to properly command a group whose war potential was unknown. Cynthia too worried how to handle them, but for the moment she would simply give them assignments with relatively low levels of risk. As expected, they couldn't suddenly become the kind of people who could be readily deployed on the front lines.

"Basically, I'm taking you all in now. I, Noel, Leader of Ten, or should I say captain, will."

Noel was reclining self-importantly in her uniform. Her gestures were like the average commander of one thousand. Sitting, Mirut and the others raised their gazes to her with stupefied expressions.

“I did hear you joined the army, but why are you suddenly in charge of ten? Isn’t that strange?”

“It’s the reward from the viceroy.”

“Sorry, but I don’t get it.”

“Well, that’s why I’m an officer. Don’t be rude to your superior, if you understand, reply.”

Ignoring her position under Cynthia, Noel spouted whatever she pleased.

“We’re suddenly told to honour you, eh? Don’t ask for the impossible. Aren’t you the most disrespectful one here?”

The villagers agreed with Mirut’s words.

“The most important thing is how you became an officer. It’s weird for a commoner woman who isn’t even a knight to suddenly be promoted.”

“That’s why I’m only in charge of ten, but even though you said all those things just now, it still leaves me ten times greater than you. Hey, isn’t that amazing?”

“I don’t think so at all. Sir Cynthia is somehow dignified, you just… aren’t.”

“I can’t lack that much dignity.”

“No matter how much you dress up in uniforms, with that attitude, and your tone of voice, you totally do.”

“Oh…”

Noel stopped reclining and looked disappointed.

“If it’s like that, stop saying stupid things, and obediently go to sir Cynthia. That way your talk with her will finish sooner.”

Noel knew her combat strength best of all, but leading a group into battle was probably impossible for her. She had recently been a simple hunter together with them not too long ago after all. Although it would only be for a short while, they would

be entrusting their lives to her, and so they wished for a more reliable commanding officer; preferably someone with lots of combat experience like Ned or Geb from the Red Circle Army.

“Cynthia, as a commander of one hundred, is busy preparing for mobilization so there is really no time to care for us new recruits. She’s rushing all over the place you know.”

“Then it would be better if we were on standby until she is free. We’re just here to pad the numbers, and you’re only a leader of ten in name right?”

“Yup, so you won’t listen to my words no matter what?

“Sorry, but that’s how it is. We can vaguely comply, so you should vaguely do it too. Just so long as nobody dies.”

Mirut had responded while yawning. Although he had left the rebellion, he had no real reason to fight for Coimbra. He trained pitifully because he planned on quitting as soon as possible regardless of what happened. If he was rewarded for properly going through the motions, all the better. His true profession was that of the hunter.

“It’s as you say Mirut.”

“True, true.”

“Ah, I thought it would probably turn out like this. That’s why I brought along a treasure just in case.”

As she spoke, Noel tied back her hair, and put on her glasses. Her sudden eccentricity most likely greatly bewildered Mirut and the villagers. A short time later, after she had changed her facial expression, she highhandedly snapped her hands onto her hips.

“I really didn’t want to do this, but there was no other way.”

“W-what?”

“On this continent, every military in existence, without exception, has distinctions of class. Talking back to your superior is not allowed. Carve that into your unworthy skulls!”

“S-suddenly putting on glasses, what are you saying? Did you hit your head somewhere?”

Noel had begun to speak in overbearing military tones similar to Cynthia’s. With a manner of speaking like a young officer, her words immediately struck the listeners. It was like she and Cynthia were a pair. Despite her being a young woman, she had that same mysterious indefinable something as Cynthia. Something they did not have themselves. It was probably along the lines of dignity or impact. Whatever it was, Noel was radiating it.

“Is this way of speaking better? Now is the time for correction. Those who still say they don’t understand, be sure to memorize it. Those who still don’t get it after that are truly beyond saving. That is what the former me was taught. One final confirmation, is this manner of speaking good?”

Smiling, Noel took up the iron hammer from her belt. Commanding the situation, she beat out the seconds rhythmically in the palm of her hand. The hammer had a red stain, but it was already too late for them to ask what it was. Mirut and the others who had seen it crash down upon the enemy soldiers had their faces unconsciously stiffen in dread. Noel played with it lightly, but the iron mass had the power to destroy a heavy wooden door. If it were to hit a skull, it would crack it open like a nut. There was no mistaking it for those who were witnesses. Mirut straightened his back and corrected his speech.

“M-my apologies, Captain Noel.”

“Very well. I ought to explain the military regulations that we will be following. If you break regulation, regardless of your being new recruits, punishment will be dealt. You are not going to be able to pass it off with some cowardly ‘because I’m just a villager’ nonsense. Do you understand?”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“Too quiet! When you acknowledge orders you are to all salute. ‘My insufficient mind has comprehended your words,’ is what your speech, and body-language must express.”

“U-understood!”

Back straight, Mirut saluted as he had seen Noel do before. The others too, hurriedly stood and saluted. After that, she scowled at them with a tremendous glare.

“All right, so from now on we’ll continue together. You will only be in the army for a short time, but it only takes one instant to die. The time after a death is painful and pointless, so it is best to do what we can when we can.”

Noel removed her glasses, gently smiled, and gave them all a friendly salute.

“Eh?”

“That went surprisingly well. As expected of Cynthia’s methods. It had an outstanding effect on the new recruits.”

“W-was that all just acting?”

“Yup, all that was just me mimicking your sharp eyes and proud speech. Well, when you aren’t flapping away in nervousness. So, was I close?”

“Ah, yeah. You looked like a real officer. Ah, that is, it was like you were a different person.”

That kind of performance was not an easy thing. She had a genuine murderous intent when threatening them to follow all orders if they valued their lives. For example, in a real battle, Mirut would probably obey his orders to thrust deep into enemy lines. He knew disobedience meant death, so compliance was only natural. The image of what had happened before was still engraved in his memories, and so he worried over using respectful language. He could not say that he wouldn’t suddenly change.

“That’s great. You can see how much smarter I become when I put on my glasses right? I’ll put them on any time I need to act important.”

Noel wrapped her glasses in a cloth and politely placed them in her pocket, and with practiced hands, untied her hair.

“If at that time they were to oppose you, what were you going to do?”

“Of course I would wallop them. If they don’t understand words, that way is the fastest. That is how education works right?”

Her mouth arched into a ferocious smile. Even though she did not have her glasses on, an aura identical to the one she had before poured out of the redheaded girl in an instant. Seeing that, Mirut and the villagers wholeheartedly made their decision. For the time they were in the military, they would not oppose Noel. She squared up with her subordinates, and instead of a salute, she flourished her hammer imposingly. If they really thought about it, she had already slain several Baharan soldiers, so she was different from them, who had not yet killed a single man.

“Um, okay, you should abide by the following rules. It is an extremely important thing for soldiers after all. Failure will result in the death penalty, so be sure to take it to heart.”

Noel took the paper which had the military regulations written on it and began to explain them. She was told to tell them the military regulations, and methods for saluting that Cynthia had taught her. Many things were written down in detail, but Noel only explained three: obey orders, do not try to flee, do not betray companions. All were obvious things, but in combat they were difficult to uphold; especially the second one about running away. When faced with an inferior position, with a tendency to become indecisive, humans would place themselves first and flee when faced from imminent disaster. It would cause formations to collapse, leading to a mass rout. Consequently, to keep the morale high, the commanders had to maintain a brave, composed front. This was the same thing that had been forcefully beaten into Noel. She was not reading the paper, but going from memory.

“This is a secret, but it is fine if you inadvertently break and run. Sitting and waiting for death is stupid.”

“Is it alright to say that?”

“In the final moments, think about it yourselves; about when you can, or cannot follow orders; about whether you fight, or don’t fight. Whether you live is a separate matter though.”

“…”

“That is what I did. I decided it that day.”

After she spoke, Noel smiled. No matter how fun a time was, that day, that place’s memory, would darken Noel’s mood for it called to mind the faces of those she lost. Her surfacing thoughts were never of their smiles, but of abandoned rotting corpses

in a hole, the gooey sensation she had come unstuck from, the stench that pierced her nose, and the cold rain. In those times, she looked to the brilliant sun, shining down from the heavens. Noel could not do without the sun for it was her greatest treasure. Though there were things she could never grasp with her hands, she could see them as much as she liked. That much was enough for her.

“That is basically the end. Well, our job isn’t to wave swords, but your own time is a separate matter.”

“What exactly does that mean?”

One of the villagers had begun to use respectful language. They had completely learned how to behave as subordinates. If not that, their fear would set in.

“It is important to deliver messages between the different corps. Captain Cynthia will teach you all sorts of things later. I’m looking forward to that.”

“I-it’s that then. I thought that they’d surely just abruptly have us stand at the front.”

“Even if they sent useless ones to the front, you’d only just add to the number of corpses you know,” Noel said her harsh words with a smile.

If that was their duty, then the chances of death were much lower. Mirut and the others let out a relieved breath. After all, they didn’t want to die, and none of them had ever killed a man before. Mirut prayed from the bottom of his heart that they could continue in that way until the rebellion ended. He wondered what it felt like to kill other people. Although the idea had come abruptly, it was not something he could ask Noel, for at the very least, if she hadn’t done it, then he and his fellow villagers would have died. He was an idiot for worrying over such things.

“Come to think of it, you’ve finally started using respectful language. Honestly, it doesn’t suit you at all. See, your faces have been all strained since earlier.”

Noel poked her cheeks, and Mirut twisted his body whilst making a face of displeasure.

“Didn’t you tell us to? Furthermore, shouldn’t you need to properly call sir Cynthia ‘captain’ as well?”

“Yup, when I called her that in public, she got angry, you know. If someone disrespects a superior, the truth is, on top of punishment, that person will also be sent to an isolation cell.”

She didn’t worry about it herself, but the other officers had warned Cynthia with unpleasant faces. As it was not good to cause trouble for friends, Noel had put on an act. Mimicking others and abiding by the rules was one of her strong points.

“Well, it will just have to be put up with while in the military, uh, captain Noel.”

Having to be so formal with a girl of the same generation created an unpleasant feeling. However, it was troubling to suddenly change again, so Mirut steeled himself to do it as much as he could.

“Yup, that’s the way.”

Speaking briefly, she told them it was time to take a break, and sat. In that way she lay, eyes closed with happy thoughts as she soaked in the sunlight. There wasn’t likely another in the military’s employ who was so carefree. It made one wonder if she was important, or an idiot. Thinking such things, Mirut too lowered himself so that his back was on the ground, and then he began to ask something that he had been curious about for a while. If he evaded the chance, he might have never again been able to find another one.

“Hey…”

“Already tired of respect, eh?”

“Just for now. I’ll use it properly later.”

“I see.”

“Why did you join the army? If you’re a regular you won’t be able to return to the village even after the rebellion has died down. If you aren’t good, you might just die.”

At Mirut’s question, Noel opened her eyes to the sun, and reached out to it with her hand.

“It’s because I made a promise with Cynthia and the young prince.”

She would search for happiness with Cynthia, and had arranged that when Elgar became great, he would share his happiness with her too. She didn't particularly hate the village, but she felt that the happiness she so longed for was beyond her grasp when she was there.

"As I thought, spending your whole life in such a declining village is disagreeable right?"

Mirut plucked out a nearby weed and held it in his mouth. The others too, quieted and listened to the conversation.

"Not really, you and Cal live there so I wouldn't hate it at all you know. Living in the village was really fun, but…"

"But?"

"If I was alone, I think it might have been fine, but I'm not alone. I absolutely have to find enough happiness for everyone. If I can't do that, at least try until the very end. So…"

Noel cut herself off.

"Can you really find it here?"

"I don't know. What I do know is that I am a little better at fighting than most. I'll gain many companions, never stop winning, and become great. I think this is the best way from what I've heard. I'm just an impaired, foolish piece of trash, so I can't think of anything else."

Noel self-depreciated with a carefree expression. Mirut couldn't tell if it was what she truly thought.

"You do know that you might die, right?"

"It can't be helped. I guess that's just the way the world works."

"I see…"

"Yup."

“You know, out of all of us, you were the one to become promoted. You surely aren’t an impaired idiot.”

“Is that so?”

“Give me guarantee. I’m properly asking you Captain Noel! Our lives depend on it you know.”

Mirut patted her shoulder as if to cheer her on. Her body was small, but her muscles were like a monster’s, and tense. After Mirut’s voice died down, the other villagers joined in too, raising their voices with ‘that’s right, that’s right,’ and other such things. Their spirits unbroken, after hearing the conversation the young ones became worked up. They didn’t really have any loyalty to Coimbra, and they were still afraid of dying, but as though they had been enchanted, they could not release their gazes from Noel. In that moment she shone frightfully bright in their minds.

“Of course! I’ll work hard so you won’t die pointlessly, okay!”

Nodding strongly, Noel stood. The light of the sun shone strongly on her back. Mirut, who had watched Noel’s face the whole time, without thinking, held up his hand to block the light. In that instant, he saw some dark shadows behind Noel. It was not simply one or two, it was some dozens, no, it could have even been hundreds. He saw their bodies tremble with pleasure. Without thinking, he shut his eyes, and the instant he opened them again, the black shadows had all disappeared.

Was that my imagination just now?

I’m not alone. Noel’s words chillingly rang through his head. The other villagers were still entranced as before, and Mirut wondered why the thin cold sheet of trepidation had enveloped him.

Noel and the others had received drums, gongs, and trumpets from the military warehouse, and headed to the harbour. They had initially practiced on the parade ground, but as that had bothered the other units, they were told to go somewhere else. It was that they were so bad, their morale dropped, causing trouble for Cynthia.

“This certainly is bad. Yes, it is completely so bad that it hurts my ears with its unpleasantness. It might be able to demoralise the enemy.”

Cynthia voiced her honest opinion.

“It isn’t sub-par, it’s hopeless. No matter how many times I try, I just can’t remember the right amount of strength to use.”

Mirut’s shoulders drooped as he clutched his drumsticks.

“That’s obvious. March, attack, stalemate, retreat, withdraw; if these things are not conveyed to the soldiers, there is no significance. In summary, that stupid way of doing it is meaningless.”

Cynthia poked Noel’s face, who complained about the pain with her eyes. While she was at it, Noel emitted a piteous sound, a trumpet in her mouth. It was popular in the navy, but for soldiers who fought on land, it wasn’t used much. Though it could be played, skill and experience were necessary, which was the cause of the current situation. Horns and drums were the mainstream signaling devices.

“How about you stop using the trumpet, and obediently switch over to percussion? You’ve already figured out the basics of it, and there is no real point in being stubborn.”

Cynthia attempted persuasion, but Noel shook her head. Noel had become interested in the trumpet which seemed to hold some nebulous history. It also looked good. She stored up breath in her cheeks, and with full force made a honk, but as expected, it was bad.

“Well, I can understand the appeal of that trumpet, but it is an ornament after all.”

Ignoring the honk that came from beside her, Cynthia continued with her talk.

“To tell the truth, I saw it in an old biography, but it seems to have belonged to an old Coimbra military or naval band. They marched to a plethora of elegant tunes. I’m sure it was a magnificent thing.”

It was a story from before the unification of the continent, from the Coimbra which had been overflowing with money, and was a bastion of high culture. Many musicians and artists had gathered, and that steady flow had affected the military. In stately uniforms, to musical accompaniment, the marching soldiers created a sight enough to overwhelm any spectators. Noel bit onto Cynthia’s story.

“That sounds super fun. Hey, did everyone walk as they sang?”

“Yes. The people forgot their fear of soldiers, morale skyrocketed, and it seems like they wanted to face an enemy. With a heroic tune, they all stepped in perfect order. In a battle they believed they would defeat their enemy; such were their aims.”

“Oh, how amazing; did it work out?”

“No, unfortunately they completely failed. They were ambushed in the middle of a performance and saw a terrible encounter. Furthermore, it was only a small number of enemies that they faced. No fewer than half of the soldiers held instruments, and as they had neglected preparations, of course that was how it went. Since then, army bands have gone out of fashion.”

It was the one disgrace during Coimbra’s golden age. The other kingdom’s military writings cited it as an example of failure, and it was an anecdote that had been well recorded. It became the proof to the saying: ‘They have money, but no men.’ That was not the only history of Coimbra’s weak soldiery, and there were many other examples of the weakness which was often laughed at.

“It still sounds fun. I really want to see it. I bet it looked magnificent. Hey Cynthia, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think that there is enough leisure time for a musical performance mid battle. There surely wouldn’t be time for it under a hail of arrows. Sorry, but I don’t want to try it at all. As long as it doesn’t get in the way of what you are doing, you can do as you please.”

“I get it. Hey, Mirut, you want to right? Let’s have a parade sometime together.”

“Sir Cynthia, please refrain from assisting Leader of Ten, Noel’s superfluous ideas. We should not earnestly attempt such foolish things.”

“Right, sorry. She’s an idiot, so she would seriously try it.”

“Even though I can hear you…”

“Of course.”

Noel honked her trumpet yet again in protest.

She and the others continued in that way for no less than half of a day, hard at practice. Cynthia had to take care of her own duties, and so she had gone back. Tooting away, Noel looked out over the harbour as the scent of the waves tickled her nose. Occasionally, things like trade ships or fishing boats would depart, and each time she honked triumphantly. Although she was of little skill, the light tune lightened her mood more than expected. It illuminated that after all, music was as fun as she had expected. Those who had once thought to introduce the old military and naval bands must have thought so too. Mirut and the others came back from the direction of the market that now lacked its former prosperity. Their arms had grown weary and so they had said they would take a break. From what she could see they had bought food and clothing with their stipend.

“You’re still at it? Why don’t you just stop being ridiculous and give it up?”

“I won’t give up yet. Is that food?”

“Yes, I also bought some things for the captain.”

Mirut pushed the trumpet aside. Inside the bag was some deep fried fish.

“Thanks.”

Plucking one from the bag, she tasted it. It was very salty. With that feeling, she blew into her trumpet. A good sound, much better than before came out.

“And here, this is a souvenir. In celebration of being promoted to being a leader of ten, and also as a bit of an apology.”

“Apology? Did you do something bad?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. Anyway, please accept it. It is a problem of my own emotions after all.”

Saying that, Mirut unveiled a cute fish-embroidered accessory case and handed it over.

“…”

“What happened that you are so silent? You don’t like it?”

“No, not at all! I was just thinking that my treasures sure had multiplied. I thought I might be a little happy.”

Noel flashed her white teeth, and smiled in a good mood from the bottom of her heart. Even though it had only been the picture book and the curious spear until then, her treasures had grown such that she could no longer hold them all in both hands. The dreadful hammer that hung from her belt, the uniform and glasses she received from Cynthia, the case she had received from Mirut, and finally, the trumpet; all were hers.

“See, you brought your glasses right? I thought you might be able to put them in there. It can soften impacts when you put it in your pocket.”

“I see, that’s true. Thanks!”

She quickly placed her glasses in it. It was just big enough and they fit completely inside. The fish embroidery gave off a good impression. Its eyes were smiling, and it was a truly wonderful thing. That was what Noel thought.

“Ahem, well then, Mirut, and all of you, as thanks I will put my feelings into music for you here.”

“That doesn’t make me particularly happy though…”

“Here I go!”

A slightly happy feeling was produced now that she blew well. Most important was the occasion, and her preparedness when she closed her eyes, and adjusted her breathing. The tune from a departing boat could be heard, and Noel too began to play the trumpet. It was both light and loud; her trumpet resounded. What came out was the sound of returning waves, and the departing trumpet played a melody reminding them of the ocean. Though the only ones to hear it were Mirut and the others, after so much time, their drums and gongs finally kept in time.

Lured in by Noel’s performance, their breaths became one. It was glorious enough that it might have received Cynthia’s approval. As great waves became one with the sea, the harbour which had become desolate regained its liveliness for a fleeting moment. Coimbra’s harbour brought to the city, resounding over the water, the songs of departing ships. Men and ships came and went; merchants took their goods to the performance in the city which was no longer busy. The fisherman, and the merchants who were in the marketplace, for a short while, felt they could hear the city’s former

glory. Noel who had finally tired, ended her performance, and Mirut and the others also stayed their hands. At that same moment, applause arose from the surroundings. Their numbers were not large, but those who applauded did so with full force, and it rang out from the bottom of their hearts which were filled with a profound satisfaction.

“Noel’s Army Band’s first performance was a great success, eh?”

“Since when were we a band? Erm, when did we become one?”

“Just now. I named it: Noel’s Army Band.”

With a proud face, Noel gave a thumbs up. Her choice had resulted in a great success, and she lightly twirled her trumpet. Everyone had the power to find fun in both performing, and listening to music. It was almost a curious kind of magic.

“Hey, let’s start up a serious army band one day, okay?”

“I’ll get to the bottom of Coimbra’s disgrace, so isn’t stopping a good way?”

“I’ll hoist a magnificent flag, and march to the trumpet. It will definitely be fun. We’ll fight together under the same banner, through life or death. That is how companions are.”

What Noel had described was a flag of her beloved sun. It was not the military flag of the Horsheido empire. That flag was nothing more than a sham; a total forgery. What Noel desired, was the real sun. To properly display the sun’s for was difficult. At a glance it appeared to be a simple circle, but there was more to it than that. It was a ball of light, not a circle. She did not know how one could adequately convey a ball of light. She thought of the outline, but if it was just an outline that would be unsatisfactory. It wasn’t good enough at all. The Horsheido army’s battle flag bore the sun’s rays in a cruciform pattern, but it was in vain. That flag was painted red, and for her own, orange would be good, but a red to match her hair would also be nice.

“W-well, it can be a bit fun I guess.”

“I know, right? So, at that time Mirut, and you all too, should join in.”

“I am going to leave the army when the rebellion ends. It is unfortunate that my job involves killing.”

“It is regrettable.”

“W-we will follow you!”

The young ones from the village continued on with ‘me too, me too,’ for some time as she saw them step forward.

“Success! Then let’s make a magnificent army band and show it to Mirut!”

“Yeah!”

“Okay, I’ll enjoy myself too you know. Hey, has this also become a promise?”

Mirut looked to Noel with hopeful eyes for affirmation, but Noel tilted her head, not understanding. It was her principle to never promise something she could not fulfill, for if she did not follow through, she could not find happiness.

“Yup, I’m not alone so I might be overdoing my promises, but hang in there, okay.”

“I see, well, please don’t forget. Hey, shouldn’t we head back about now? Let’s surprise sir Cynthia with the fruits of our labours.”

“It’s a good enough time. All right, then, a trumpet for the charge! Noel company, commence assault!”

Noel, rapidly playing the trumpet, suddenly broke out into a run. Mirut and the villagers rushed forwards, unbroken.

Author's Note:

Leader of Ten, Noel (Glasses on)

Her face looks good. She plays the trumpet.

The glasses are important as they allow her to not break her act.

Glasses Skills:

- Trumpet of Protest
- Assault Trumpet
- Wake-up Trumpet

Translator's Note:

I mostly only changed Noel's dialogue.

Chapter 10
A Border of White and Black

Several days later, Noel's party received their first mission. Although it was labeled as such, it was nothing along the lines of scouting or maneuvering. Their orders were to deliver messages, and were simple things that anyone could carry out. Rockbell had fallen to the enemy, and scattered along the Kanan highway —the road connecting the fallen district to the capital city of Madress— several small villages were dotted about. Noel company's objective was to inform them of the approaching rebel army, and to urge them to remain vigilant. Simply there to warn of potential dangers, they were not to protect them as there were not enough soldiers to be stationed at the many villages in the area.

Grohl's administration could see that from their base in Rockbell, the rebel army's sphere of influence was expanding. Ever since the rebellion began it had never stopped in one place for long, and had gathered up the malcontent as it marched south. They surmised that the rebels had ceased their advance with the intent of prolonging the rebellion. Knowing that Bahar had backed the rebels made their motivations obvious. They aimed to lower public opinion of Coimbra by miring the province in civil war, and eventually to investigate Viceroy Grohl for responsibility. If that were to succeed, Amil would secure his position as the next emperor, and effectively bury a future potential political opponent. It was truly a two birds with one stone scenario. Grohl hated yet understood it, and while he was grinding his teeth in his mind, until the meeting with all the soldiers came to an end, he tempered his sporadic condemnations. In the decisive battle, if they could win quickly, they could more or less alleviate the negative stigma which had built up over time. If he was rash and lost by taking an inferior position, it could be fatal.

"So, where is the next one?"

"Please entrust me with showing you the way," the soldier told Noel as he spread open a map.

"Ahaha, somehow you've gotten used to this, eh?"

"We've gradually grown accustomed to it. That Mirut guy doesn't seem like he's used to it yet though."

“Shaddup,” Mirut rejected him, displeased.

Unlike the others he was not in the mood for smiling. Their objective was supposedly to prevent the spreading of their enemy’s sphere of influence, but all they could do was extremely simple. “The enemy is approaching, so you should flee rather than keep yourselves in danger,” or “Although Coimbra is unable to send soldiers at this point, joining the rebellion is still punishable by death,” were all they said in accordance with their orders as they wandered from place to place. There had been no positive reactions from the people, and all that Noel company had heard were things such as jeers, and insults. Sometimes they would even have mud slung at them. It was only natural that the villagers would be angry when told there would be no help, but that they should be careful.

“Even still, they’re all super angry, right? That old man earlier frothed at the mouth and collapsed.”

“That is true. It’s because the villages are highly taxed yet aren’t given any protection. The province’s soldiers are supposed to be here for times like these.”

Mirut sighed. Had the soldiers moved properly, he wouldn’t have had to be there. Everyone from Zoim would most likely have been safe, which was a fate he could only pray for at the moment.

Noel, who had no way of knowing his thoughts, offered, “But, aren’t mud fights fun?”

“The only one who had fun was you, Captain. We had just been supplied with our armour too. Ah, the mud is going to stain it. This is really the worst.”

Mirut tutted as he looked at his own appearance. His armour was new, but already the chest piece that protected him had become tragically smeared with mud. Even the clothes he wore under it were mud-stained such that they gave off a gooey aura. Simply wanting to leave or having an injured pride were unacceptable excuses, so he couldn’t even go so far as to raise his desperately controlled voice. As a result of it all, every member of Noel company had become entirely covered in mud. The unparalleled optimism was held by only one girl, Noel, who was the only one to carry on as usual.

It would be reasonable to say that she was hardly filthy at all. Often magnificently dodging the mud balls thrown by the villagers, and following through with a harsh blow when she saw a chance. Of course she didn’t respond with the likes of her spear

or hammer, but with mud balls of her own. After about an hour the villagers would grow tired and disperse, and Noel would play happily with the remaining children. Were Cynthia to hear of it, she would most likely be exasperated yet again, wondering what the commander was thinking.

“By the way, how do you avoid it so well? It seems like you didn’t really get hit by them much.”

“I watch carefully, you know. If I do that it is easy.”

“Just avoiding them by watching… normally that can’t be done for so long you know.”

“Is that so? Even though I can do it. Anyone can do it if they practice right?”

Noel made a puzzled face. It wasn’t particularly difficult for her after all. Just dodging mud balls was nothing to her. Whoever it may have been from, and wherever they may have aimed, all could be figured out by observing their hands. With those basics, the mud balls themselves didn’t need to be seen to be dodged. Occasionally an astute one would send a fast ball flying, and those had to be carefully watched.

“With that way of thinking, arrows, or whatever can be dodged, right?”

“True. Hey, maybe… I’m amazing?”

“Sure, yeah, you really are amazing. As expected of Noel, Leader of Ten.”

Mirut, not having any of it, shook off his hands, and continued walking while brushing off the mud, following after Noel. When Noel fought, there were times when her instincts became unusually sharp. During those times, something was there. Knowing that he made sure to watch her closely. He would avoid it by watching, or maybe just learn to cope; he had managed to survive by doing so until that point. It was obvious, yet it was difficult to convey in words. If he watched closely everything would be okay, and that was all he found he could do.

For the following three days, Noel company continued in the same duty. Following their map from village to village, one by one, they continued to survey. Ignoring the curses they had become sick of hearing, dripping with mud, Noel’s party continued to perform their duty. Finally, they turned to head in the direction of the last village they had been ordered to go to. Proceeding east along the Kanan highway, their destination was on the far side of a slightly elevated knoll. Their prospects were good for just by

cresting the knoll they could gain an unbroken view. The once great flow of people along the highway had petered out, and now only occasional local's wagons passed through. There was also the rebellion that had arisen, which caused the number of merchants that could be seen to decrease. On the reverse slope, patches of woods stretched out. Aside from that, there were also wheat fields; furthermore, they were able to confirm that a small settlement was beyond it. They were just a short distance from their destination, and knowing that, Mirut who had the map, let out his voice, wanting to hurry onward.

"Watch out!"

Noel, from beside him, unexpectedly knocked him down while he was wiping his sweat. As it had been sudden, Mirut had not prepared himself for it and his face made it all the way to the dirt. Thankfully the soil was soft, and he merely hurt his nose.

"That hurt!! You just suddenly!"

"It's fine so ready your weapons. The enemy approaches."

"Enemy!? From where!?"

Noel prepared her bident, and as a whistle came from above the trees, somebody landed. It was a man with a red cloth wrapped around his arm who was from the same village as Mirut. It was Fraser.

"Heh, it's impressive that you reacted to my arrow. I'll be honest and credit you with that, Noel."

"F-fraser!?"

"Yo Mirut. So the others are with you too. I thought you were some stupid provincial soldiers, so I shot at you. You're even wearing the Coimbra uniform. Did you betray us, the Red Circle Army?"

"N-no, th-there is a reason…"

"Hey, Fraser. Did you intend to kill Mirut?"

Interrupting Mirut who was trying to explain, Noel asked a question of her own. Mirut too noticed the arrow protruding from the dirt. It was a sharp arrow that was in the

place that Mirut had been unmistakably standing. If Noel hadn't protected him, he would certainly no longer be alive. He finally realised after so much time that Fraser had seriously attempted to kill him.

"Well, it's obvious to try to kill the enemy. Even more so if he happens to be a traitor," Fraser explained calmly.

In his hand was the bow from his days as a hunter, and he was nocking another arrow. Behind him, about thirty armed men came into sight. Each of them had a red cloth tied to his arm. Among them was their conspicuously large acquaintance, Kraft.

"That's true. The enemy has to be killed, eh."

Noel placed her hands on her hips, and the soldiers wordlessly drew their swords.

"Oi, wait you guys! You too, Fraser! We didn't really betray you guys. Alright, let's calm down and listen, okay? The rebellion was started by the Bahar province!"

"Oh, is that true?"

"So, the Red Circle Army's leader isn't thinking about the people at all. The rebellion was raised all for their own sake after all!"

"I see, I see. I don't mind you shouting that, but then, so what?"

Fraser tilted his head with an unpleasant smile. Kraft was making a similar expression. It was unthinkable for him to be the same person who had been so cowardly before. A longsword was resting on his shoulder, and he turned his dangerous gaze to them.

"S-so what? The rebellion is meaningless! If you guys don't leave soon, you'll be given the death penalty when you are captured!"

"He he, you don't understand Mirut. You don't understand at all. If you had stuck with us, you would have had *so* much fun."

Kraft nodded an innumerable number of times to Fraser's words.

"Fun?"

“Yeah, the fun of pillage. Taking anyone’s prize possessions. Trampling on the weak and showing off your power as much as you’d like. It’s seriously fun. It is the true feeling of being alive, felt from the bottom of your heart.”

“You, what are you…”

“Hey, Mirut. How many people do you think I killed in Rockbell? 30. Those who were smarter than me, who seemed like they had more money than me, I shot them with arrows, and stabbed them with spears; I butchered them you know.”

“F-fraser?”

“Did you know? When you slash someone’s head with a sword, loads of blood comes spewing out. After that you help yourself to things like that man’s woman and property. Ha ha, once you’ve done it once, you definitely can’t stop.”

Fraser was looking at Noel with the face of a starved wolf. Drool dripped from his mouth as his surging lust boiled over.

“Stop saying stupid shit, and leave the rebel army! Right now, all of the soldiers in Coimbra are gathering in Madress, so your chances of winning are already gone!”

“Then I should just rage to my heart’s content. I can’t return to that shitty, miserable life anymore. I won’t desperately hunt so that those retards can take it away. There is no way I could do something like living off of a paltry sum in a life of alternate joy and worry. The one who dies is better off.”

“It’s like that, so I’m sorry all of you with Mirut. But, I think so too. That place is truly boring. That kind of life, living like a piece of trash, is something I just won’t go back to, sorry.”

Kraft continued on while smiling. The feeling of his former naivete had completely vanished. He completely didn’t understand their story. Faced with the two who had changed drastically, Mirut could do nothing but become speechless.

“By the way, were you the ones who killed Captain Ned as he led the flying column? Mr. Geb was grieving for him you know.”

“Yup, that’s how it is. I killed him.”

Noel nodded honestly.

“You were killed by a woman, Ned? As a former captain that is surprisingly pitiful. Did you get him in a surprise attack?”

“Nope, we properly fought. Face to face.”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter either way. Mr. Geb was just curious you know.”

“…”

“By the way, Noel. I’ll ask just one more time, but do you still not want to come with me? If you come here there will be all kinds of fun experiences to be had.”

“My answer is the same as before, though. Please stop, okay? It doesn’t seem like I’d be happy with you after all. That, and I have loads of companions now.”

Noel expressionlessly, yet thoroughly rejected him. Fraser seemed unexpectedly ashamed, but quickly re-grasped his aura.

“Heh, so it’s like that. Well, that’s fine I guess, taking you along by force next time will make for a good story. I’ll overlook today’s spot for the friendship we once shared. Next time I won’t forgive you so prepare yourself.”

Fraser shouldered his bow while Kraft laughed.

“Later, everyone. If you want to come this way, going all the way to Rockbell would be good. I’ll always welcome you after all.”

“You might accidentally be attacked and killed though.”

Disinterestedly raising his hand, Fraser returned to the armed men. Kraft followed behind him at a lazy pace. Facing their backs, Noel called out.

“Hey. Is there already no way for Fraser and Kraft to be allies? You really won’t return to my side?”

At Noel’s question, Fraser stopped for just an instant. His tone of voice was level, but somewhere in his heart, he was appealing for something. That was how Mirut felt, so maybe Fraser and Kraft did too.

Fraser ruffled the hair on his head as though irritated, and looking back, said, “That’s right, we aren’t companions anymore. From the start we were only people from the same village. From now on we are mutual enemies. I am on the side that pillages, and you are on the side that is pillaged. A winner and a loser, it’s simple right?”

“I see. Then, that’s fine. We’ll meet again I guess.”

Having said that, Noel began to walk disinterestedly. Fraser and the others could no longer be seen, and she promptly began marching toward the village that was their destination.

“Is that alright?”

“It’s fine. Until now, I thought they were allies. I won’t hold back the next time we meet. We’ll be enemies after all.”

Noel gave an indifferent answer to the soldier’s question. Every member of Noel company became vigilant against Fraser and the others of the rebel army, and like that they continued on. What followed was not a fortunate thing. They didn’t know if Fraser had truly overlooked them, or if he had a different objective. Mirut was relieved. Even if he had become suited for murder, Fraser had almost not even appeared like he wanted to kill them. Mirut didn’t think he would raise his sword to an opponent whom he had known since childhood, although Fraser and Kraft had seemed to have had no difficulties overcoming that hurdle.

“H-hey. What exactly were they doing? It’s like they are different people from the ones we knew in the village!”

“They must have changed. He said that he knew the joy of pillage after all. If it is like that, it can’t be helped.”

“I-it can’t be helped? Don’t say that so easily! We are people from the same village!”

“Then explaining until they understand is fine. You’d obviously die so I don’t recommend it though. Mirut, you are one of my companions so if you are killed I’ll be sad.”

Noel’s words had a cold bite. Those eyes held nothing of human nature in them. Mirut prepared his words when he found himself averting his gaze.

From his mouth came a question to which he already knew the answer, “The next time we meet those guys, how will you feel?”

“I don’t think we’ll even meet again, but in the one in a thousand chance we do,” Noel gently stroked her bident, “I’ll obviously kill them. I don’t want to be on the side that is pillaged, so the enemy absolutely has to be killed. I already said it can’t be helped, and we have no obligation to save them.”

“As expected of a military woman. I couldn’t cut them off so easily you know. It would be impossible.”

“I think that’s good, Mirut, as a way of living. It’s very human, having that kind of attachment.

“It doesn’t matter that I’m a coward then.”

“You could also call it being gentle. If everyone thought like you do Mirut, I bet this world would be full of happiness.”

Noel’s face twisted as her mouth curved into a cynical smile. That such a carefree girl could make that expression was such a shock that Mirut’s eyes went round.

“N-Noel?”

“Well, at the end of the day, there are all sorts of people, so it’s however you live is fine.”

“Just living as one pleases, and quickly dying doesn’t seem to me like it holds any meaning.”

“Well, that’s true.”

“Those idiots, don’t they understand that?”

“Who knows, is it really like that? It doesn’t make too much sense to me, though. Well, it doesn’t matter either way if it is about the enemy.”

With a weak laugh, Noel shrugged her shoulders as he watched.

Watching them approach the village were Fraser and the other soldiers of the Red Circle Army. Looking at their receding figures, Kraft tilted his head.

“Hey, isn’t that good, Fraser. We were easily overlooked. First of all, didn’t we come to crush that village?”

“Mr. Geb ordered us not to be too violent in this area. It isn’t like it would have been a big deal with a village that run down. Unfortunately, we’ll have to overlook it this time,” Fraser spat disinterestedly.

Fraser, who had skill with the bow, and Kraft, who had a large build and probably great strength, had become Geb’s eyes. It seemed like the skilled Geb was Ristih’s most trusted retainer, and so his face was useful in a variety of situations. There was even some talk that they could become subordinates after the fighting was over.

I don’t know how serious that person was, but I will just go to the places I can. That way I can feel alive.

If those were Geb’s true feelings, it didn’t matter whether or not Ristih’s objectives for the Red Circle Army were noble. He just lived violently as he pleased. He was venting all of the unpleasant feelings that he had accumulated throughout his life.

Furthermore, humans are the ultimate game, completely different from mere beasts.

Unlike when aiming at animals, his heart pounded when he aimed at humans. He could never taste that unique excitement unless the target was a human. It completely removed the feeling of killing something unaware, and he could gain a sense of accomplishment. It spoke of the proof that they had ascended the staircase to adulthood that Geb had set out for them. Kraft was similar. His speciality had changed from the hoe, to the longsword. He wished for the war to expand, and prolonging it was desirable. Those were Fraser’s true thoughts. It no longer mattered what happened to his mother in Zoim. He didn’t even know if she was alive or dead; what was important was the matter of what he would do in the moment.

“Speaking of which, Noel just now seemed a bit lonely, didn’t she?”

“Is that so? I thought she felt the same as always.”

Fraser thought back, but didn't recall any particular loneliness. All he knew was that she had no interest in him at all. That was unendurable for Fraser. The whole thing was frustrating, and what made it worse was the fact that Mirut was the one beside her. That was why he had aimed at him with the intent to kill.

"But somehow, she looked lonely, you know? Nah, it must be my imagination."

"We went out of our way to tell her to follow us, and she rejected us herself. How would it make any sense for her to feel lonely."

"That's true. It looks like it was my imagination after all."

"What I'm curious about is the villagers other than Mirut. Wasn't something a bit strange?"

While Fraser was speaking to Mirut and Noel, the other youths of the village were staring at them, swords in hand. They were waiting for orders like well disciplined soldiers. What exactly was that, he wondered.

"They didn't have the nervousness of people intimidated by you Fraser. Maybe because we didn't have anything like those swords."

"Pfft, it isn't like it matters. Next time we meet, I'll kill the others and Noel will become mine after all. Don't interfere, Kraft."

They would beat Noel half to death and capture her, killing the others. The debt of their previous friendship in the village had been repaid when he overlooked them. He didn't need mercy when dealing with former companions who had suddenly left the Red Circle Army for the Coimbra military; especially Mirut. The plan was to rip him apart and show the pieces to his little sister Cal. Whatever expression she would make would certainly be enjoyable.

"Wow, that's unfair. Then, what should I do?"

"I don't know. Anyway, if you touch Noel before me, I'll kill you."

"Somehow your face is scary, Fraser."

"It's because you don't know how to hold back."

Spitting, Fraser signaled with his hand. It was the time that they had to head back. Their mission had been to scout the area. Only Fraser knew of Geb's true intentions. The knoll overlooking the highway was an important strategic position. It was a place that the Coimbra military didn't realise the significance of, but to the Red Circle Army it was different.

A good time to take the capital is the harvest festival. We'll show those shitty nobles that the only difference between people is the place they were born. That's right Noel. No matter how composed you appear, just one layer down, you are the same as us all.

He tried imagining Noel's face distorted by fear in the manner of the women from Rockbell; a face dyed in agony and despair. However, it didn't matter how many times he tried, he couldn't get a clear image. No matter how much he imagined tormenting her, in the end, he could only picture her showing her teeth in a smile. Unexpectedly, chills ran down his spine.

"…"

Looking over his shoulder, the sun's rays pierced his back, and the sight of the far off Noel reached his eyes. He couldn't clearly see it, but he got the feeling that her eyes were confirming their presence. They were like the eyes of a beast. She didn't have a bow, yet he had a premonition that she would shoot them dead.

Those eyes, I feel like I have seen them before. When, and where was it?

"Ah, it was that time."

It was a story from the time when she had recently come to the village. When she was hunting, her eyes were always like that. Would the arrow hit, or miss; would the target die, or live; that was all that she would be thinking of. This time, those eyes were directed at him. He hated that feeling from the bottom of his heart, though it had been a while since he had gone hunting with her. He became afraid of the time when that arrow would seek him out. It was the first time he felt death so close. The time when he was unreserved with others, and the time when he held special feelings had in an instant faded until nothing was left. He didn't know when it had started, but Noel had at one point recognised him as an ally.

Suddenly, he understood. He himself had answered her final question with a no. Without mistake he had become enemies with her. At their next meeting, Noel would certainly come with the intent to kill. Unlike Mirut and the others, she held no

reservations, or mercy towards humans when they were her targets. Beneath her childlike brightness was lurking a simple-minded cruelty. Fraser had been initially smitten by that dual nature and so there was no mistaking it. His elevated emotions rapidly plummeted, and he was struck by the sensation that he had made an unbelievable mistake.

“What’s wrong, Fraser?”

“N-nothing.”

Fraser noncommittally replied to Kraft, walking quickly away.

I wasn’t wrong. What’s wrong with living the way I want to? I was just a kid at the time. I’m different now, there’s no way I’d be scared by a female opponent.

Fraser spat and kicked at the ground. He attempted to stop his overwhelming imagination, but all of his efforts were in vain as the image of Noel’s gaze would not leave him. The pounding rays that felt as though they could penetrate his back were an unpleasant experience.

Noel company returned to the capital around the same time that the rebel army left Rockbell. A great number of soldiers were moving toward the capital, and reports of invasion had already arrived. The total forces of the rebel army that had taken the name Red Circle Army numbered five thousand strong. Although Grohl had thought that it would be a war of attrition, he quickly ordered their interception. Staying inside the walls, and slowly bleeding the enemy to death was what the cautious faction had lobbied for, but Grohl had shouted them down.

Whoever looked at it, defending a castle against mere rebels would seem pathetic. Furthermore, the castle town’s defences were lackluster and so casualties and destruction were guaranteed. Already, Grohl planned to sally forth, take the field, and exterminate them. Neither his judgement, nor his plan was a fallacious. However, he viewed his opponents as scum, and if he couldn’t quickly achieve victory, he would become impatient, arrogantly believing that he could overwhelm them with numbers and higher quality equipment. Those three follies clouded his vision and threatened to dull his reasoning. As to whether or not they would be fatal was not yet known.

“This is my first time participating in such a large scale military operation. My chest is unexpectedly pounding.”

“Isn’t that the common cold? Hey, do you have a fever?”

“Even though you aren’t wearing your glasses, your words are still poor. Or are you saying that this is your place?”

“No. I heard this from a friend before, but humans are complicated so they can’t be judged by their faces.”

“Hmm?”

“If there are many good people who have killed great numbers, there must also be many evil people who have saved great numbers. Humans are like the sun, you see, with all kinds of forms. If you don’t observe it multilaterally, you’ll never see its true figure.”

Noel was speaking like a philosopher. It gave off a profound feeling, no, it was something else. Cynthia was shaking her head.

“Sorry, but I don’t understand the meaning at all.”

“It means that with or without glasses, I am the same me. Hey, I just said something good just now, right?”

“I was a fool for seriously listening to your story. Look, just obediently play your trumpet. As calmly as you can.”

Cynthia overbearingly stuffed the trumpet on to Noel’s mouth. Noel, rather than resisting, accepted it, and blew out a meaningless toot.

“This is the military’s might, when we array for battle we will certainly win. We will crush them quickly, and return peace to Coimbra.”

‘Toooooot!’

“Shhh.”

The assembled troops, at the commander's orders, turned together and began to exit the castle. Coimbra's military flag, and the scale insignia proudly flew. Cynthia's troop's turn was still to come. In that way they were to march from the castle, out of the castle town, and onto the highway where they planned to intercept the rebel army. Grohl ordered them into the crane's wings formation to maximise the advantage of their superior numbers. The left and right wings would encircle the enemy, and exterminate them. As the rebel's numbers were inferior they should have no way of countering it. Cynthia was sure of victory, and nodded strongly.

"Amazing, your expression looks confident of victory. See, it's loosening. You're seeming terribly negligent."

Poking Cynthia's cheek with her finger, her hand was brushed away, and Cynthia hurriedly objected.

"T-there is nothing of that sort here. I am simply bracing myself right now! You are the one who should worry about negligence!"

"Oh really. So what you're showing me is actually nervousness then. Look, your body is totally trembling."

"D-don't say stupid things!"

Cynthia strongly bit her tongue. Her face distorted as she desperately endured the pain. Noel asked if she was truly okay with a wry smile. Patrolling the rear, with stiff faces, Mirut and the others stood straight in a similar manner to Cynthia's veterans. There was no helping that they were like that before their first battle. Noel was unexpectedly looking up to the sky. The sun's form was obscured by a cloud. It gave off a poor impression and Noel was slightly disappointed.

"Well, as long as we're alive, we can do something. If I do that, I wonder how many times I'll have to fight to finally win," Noel murmured to herself.

The turning point was the game of black and white that they would play together. They had no way of knowing if they would lose several times in the fighting, but it would be fine as long as they turned the tables in the end. She figured that that was what Geb meant when he had told her to always win if she wanted to find happiness. However difficult the process, getting the last laugh was a good thing. In summary, defeat for Noel was either dying in the middle of a dream, or surrendering; only those two. Submission to the enemy was no good, and so she may have had to die.

“As I said, puff up your chest more, maybe fill in some of the space there. Cynthia, Commander of One Hundred.”

“O-of course. But, the part that protects the lives of the soldiers needs to have some breathing room!”

“I see. Then there’s no helping it. I give up.”

Noel thought of teasing her more, but decided to stop. If she kept it up too long she felt that she would be punched. Feeling somewhat tired, she opened her mouth wide and let out a breath.

“Even though it is just before a battle, you’re yawning. Are you an idiot, or a big-shot, I can’t tell.”

“What would happen if I was a big-shot?”

“Let’s see, how about, as an elegant general you would lead me into combat. How about you are labelled as the General of 100 Victories?”

Cynthia had a wry smile while making fun of her, and Noel nodded obediently.

“Then I should go one step further and become the commander-in-chief. That is slightly higher than a regular general, and would make me greater, right?”

“C-commander-in-Chief Noel. I can only think of that as a poor joke, so don’t say it twice. You’d get too excited.”

“You were the one who said it first, Cynthia. Ah, wasn’t it sir Cynthia?”

After speaking to her without proper honorifics, she rebuked Cynthia with her gaze, but she soon stopped as she felt that she would be hit.

“With that, it is all good. Aside from me, the other officers will care. You’d be punished by beating.”

While she was saying that, it came time for Cynthia’s troop to depart. Taking the reigns from a soldier who had brought a horse, Cynthia mounted it. It seemed that commanders of one hundred were permitted to be on horseback. With a lance in her

hand, her whole body was covered in stately armour. With her visor down it became impossible to tell that she was a woman.

“Cynthia company is departing! Everyone follow me!”

“Yeah!”

In the vanguard, Cynthia carefully spurred her horse onward. Matching her, Noel and the rest followed, the sound of the trumpet and their drums ringing out. The fruits of their labours had ripened, and this time there were no complaints about their performance. The soldiers with spears followed behind Cynthia and marched out. Their steps fell in sync so as not to disturb the formation.

Noel held her bident and commenced the march, leading Mirut and the others. On top of their uniforms, they wore iron breastplates, and helmets. The few plates they had been supplied with were spaced out such that the thought of it obstructing movement never occurred to them. None of it would get in the way during an emergency.

This is my first campaign. I’ll have to properly find out if what I learned there will be of any help.

After remembering the faces of her precious friends, Noel recalled the faces of her teachers. Her beautiful memories became black. Noel regretted sincerely not skewering his head. Those guys were unmistakably the enemy.

“Well then, let’s give it our all. This is our first battle.”

“Yeah!”

Noel smiled, and the young ones from the village raised their arms as they raised their spirits. Mirut who did nothing aside from refusing to follow along, could only shake his head.

Chapter 11
A Red Circle Split

The Coimbra Military was heading north on the Kanan Highway to engage the rebel army under Grohl's personal control. Almost all of the highway that stretched in the direction of the capital was visible across the plains. Its east bank transitioned into hill country, and they had to pass through Rockbell in order to get to the more difficult mountainous terrain. Their scouts reported that the rebel army was assembling its troops and continuing to advance as it pleased. Perhaps as a result of their taste for pillage, the rebel army was in a feverish frenzy.

Grohl instantly abandoned the idea of going to his suppression council for advice.

"As I thought, the battle will be somewhere near here, in the middle of the highway. We have the advantage in manpower and equipment, so we shouldn't rush, but rather carefully carry out our assault. We'll slowly envelop them, and wait for their defeat. That way we can avoid major losses and achieve victory."

Wilm made his suggestion while he stared at the map which was spread out atop a table. The enemy had little equipment and organization, and was primarily composed of untrained individuals. If Coimbra could encircle them and pelt them with arrows, they could most likely achieve victory. From Wilm's point of view, it was okay for Grohl to pile up more mistakes, but he had no intentions of allowing the rebels to advance to the capital as they pleased. He had to stop the rebels at all costs before they reached the capital, though he didn't know the exact circumstances of the situation. It was true that [he had allowed] the rebellion to arise, but it would only be acceptable to, at most, dethrone Grohl.

If I recall, the leader of the rebellion was supposed to be Ristih, right? He most likely wants to quickly grab glory by taking the capital for himself, but as one would expect, I can't allow that. My opinion of Amil aside, I am still a man of Coimbra.

"That's too weak! We'll use the crane wing formation as planned, and crush the insects without stopping! It doesn't matter that they were deceived by Bahar, those who took part in the slaughter of their fellows cannot be forgiven!"

"But, there is no need to waste soldiers' lives in an aggressive attack."

“It is for this kind of emergency that the soldiers have weapons and training. Do you think this can end without bloodshed!?” Grohl bellowed as his face went red.

After all, if the poor from Coimbra’s north hadn’t advanced as they had, the soldiers that were concentrated in the south would have been able to organise. The rebels numbered 8 000 strong and could be summarily crushed by the entire military force of Coimbra. What infuriated Grohl was that their numbers had been miscalculated.

“… In that case, the short-term plan doesn’t change, is that correct?”

“That is how it is. Wilm, you take the centre, and wait until you see a chance at victory to charge with your men. When you signal, all forces shall attack. Know that I won’t allow retreat!”

“Yes sir, leave it to me!”

Wilm saluted and left the tent. His son Leue was standing by outside, and his daughter Riglette was approaching. The two of them were both in the Coimbra military and had good positions for their respective ages. Wilm had especially kept an eye on Leue and held great hopes for his future. He excelled in the literary and military arts, and had garnered great trust from the soldiers. He possessed all the qualities of a brilliant commander. If he gained experience, there would be no complaints if he became Wilm’s successor.

On the other hand, Riglette was a piece for political marriage, and if she could manage that, he would be satisfied. Unlike Leue, she didn’t seem to have any talent for military affairs at all. From childhood she had been of a weak constitution, and her face had always been too pale. She had always worn glasses and was so frail that she was unable to properly grip a sword. Without the Grambull family name, she never could have joined the military. It was to the point that he had thought many times that it seemed like his friend’s orphan, Cynthia, was more like a child of his. Above all, Riglette’s melancholic disposition, gaze, and bearing were such that it unavoidably irritated him, despite their blood relation. Her existence seemed as though it would become the embodiment of [melancholy] with the way things were. On the other hand, there was also that their house employed devious stratagems. When she gazed at their dirty secrets, them simply entering her field of view was enough to irritate her. To say it clearly, had she not been his daughter, he would have already gotten rid of her.

“Father, how was the war council?”

“Leue? As expected, the Viceroy is pushing for a swift, decisive victory. There is no change of plan.”

“I don’t understand. To say it clearly, he won’t win by encircling them will he? I don’t think there is much need to take any unnecessary casualties though.”

Wilm nodded at Leue’s words.

“It is as you said. However, the Viceroy must consider his honour. If he is cautious when his opponents are mere brigands, he fears that his reputation will be tarnished.”

“He easily allowed the rebellion to arise, so why would he care about losing face at this point? After that, what could he even be worried about, eh?”

Leue smiled weakly. He had already been informed of the plan to remove Grohl.

“Hm, it is exactly like you’ve said. However, if you don’t take care, you may lose your life in battle. Absolutely make sure you don’t drop your guard. I won’t permit you to die in such a menial fight.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Good.”

Following after Leue, Riglette saluted.

“Riglette, I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“… What is it you were talking about?”

“Nothing you don’t already know. I have no interest in your life or death. Don’t bring shame to the Grambull house for once, and show me how you fight. You may be a woman, but there is still probably some scrap of a soldier in you. Seriously, you should learn from Cynthia, Commander of One Hundred.”

Wilm snorted and Riglette grimaced, only furthering his irritation. He may have done so in order to conceal his facial expression, but his dissatisfaction was still vivid. If

Leue had a brilliant military disposition, then Riglette was shadowy in nature. That was truly distressing for Wilm if she really was his daughter.

“If you give the order, I will gladly serve in the vanguard.”

“Stop spouting things that you can’t do. If someone who can’t even hold a sword is sent to the front, that person will only die in vain. It will be fine if you command supporting archers. I can’t allow the Grambull house’s name to be smeared with mud. At that time I will discard even family if I need to.”

“…”

“Is there something you want to say?”

“No, I understand.”

Riglette nodded, but the corners of her mouth twitched. She was most likely thinking something like, *in that case, don’t start by saying unnecessary things*. That girl’s face was quick to show her discontent, and she would blatantly click her tongue at inappropriate times. Those kinds of actions greatly displeased Wilm to the core. Enduring the urge to strike her cheek with full force, Wilm changed the topic.

“By the way, about what I previously ordered, I wonder if it has been carefully arranged.”

“Father, it is all as you wished. Lady Sarah has begun, and nobody suspects a thing.”

“Hm, then things are well.”

“… That doctor is…”

“You have absolutely no reason to know. You aren’t permitted to even investigate it, so just obediently follow my instructions.”

Wilm led Leue, and in that way they turned to walk towards his troops. Riglette stood, utterly frustrated. If she spoke with him any more than that, he really would have hit her, so she hurriedly left his field of view. What had been arranged was for Grohl’s injured wife Sarah. Wilm held his breath; the doctor would approach her, and he didn’t know what would happen after that, but his preparations were not ones that could be overcome.

“By the way, father. Are the rebels really about to attack without thinking? They must have realised where the inferior numbers lie.”

“That is only natural.”

“Then, there is only one plan to gather numbers. To be careful, I’ve investigated this area in advance. Please look at this.”

“Show me.”

He took Leue’s map; if it had been himself, what would he have done? Thinking it over, he quickly figured it out. What would he do if he was Ristih? The commander was a civilian from another province. The only ones capable of damaging his foes were the soldiers and mercenaries from Bahar. With those troops, how would he overturn the situation? If he followed the plan, the chance that his rebel army would be betrayed by the suppression force from Bahar wasn’t low.

“A desperate sneak attack is all it can be, eh. If he can defeat the viceroy the situation will become more chaotic, and if it goes well it could lead to a mass rout. It will become a gamble, but the possibility of it working out is high. The sad truth is that in this army I am currently the most effective in emergency situations.”

Wilm spoke cynically.

“We don’t have any effective methods for fighting a war of attrition, and Ristih most likely knows this. If he was able to see the viceroy’s temper that well, he has most likely already prepared the attack. Now all we have to do is decide how to handle it.”

Speaking his thoughts, Leue turned a questioning gaze to Wilm. What came to face him was a rebel army composed mainly of civilians. That was most likely the majority; however, it was one that was like a lure. The rebel force would quickly be disadvantaged. Grohl gave the order for a full frontal assault, and both wings began to charge; the centre even more so. Ristih most likely had expected that was what would happen up until that point. Wilm raised his gaze to the easterly hills. That was a place from which there was an unbroken view of the highway. If so, they would send a select elite to conceal themselves there.

“Listen well Leue. Do not reveal this matter to anybody.”

“Yes sir, of course.”

“Good.”

Wilm folded the map and placed it in his breast pocket. Suffering just a single loss could still be worked to his advantage. So long as his household was in good order, anything could work. His initial plans were different, but as long as the outcome was the same, it didn’t matter. Ristih’s plan was not only to take Grohl’s head, but also to take the capital. Wilm, however, would never allow that. If he did not stop at removing Grohl, then Wilm would reorganise the remaining soldiers and annihilate the rebels. The enemy would suffer losses [in the upcoming battle] too, and that was enough to make it feasible [to stop them].

I hadn’t thought simply taking his life would be such an exertion, but that only seems regrettable. Viceroy, the truth is, I’m not on your side. That is just you paying for your own mistakes, and your punishment will be well received. Please leave the future of Coimbra to us.

Kanan Highway’s plains division.

Under a sky without a single cloud, the rebel army had taken the initiative and had begun to form its strike. Without proper ranks, the rebels spread out horizontally in a formation that naturally bulged in the centre. The Coimbra army had both wings arrayed to engage the enemy as planned. The rebel army had initially been winning, but this would not be as easy as Rockbell. Because they had not experienced anything other than overrunning their opponent, if they didn’t break through in one push, there was no other option. Slowly, but with a numerical advantage, they began to pressure the Coimbra army.

Cynthia, deployed in the rear guard of the right wing, was confirming the progress of the battle with a telescope. A newcomer to the hierarchy, she wished she could be on the front lines, but it was not allowed, and she was ordered to stay at the back. If her first battle was a close fight, she would do anything to achieve meritorious service, yet that wish did not seem likely to be granted.

“Hmm. At this rate it doesn’t seem like the battle will end without the opportunity for merit will it? What is this?”

Cynthia groaned atop her horse and folded her arms. Speaking clearly, she could already see the course of the battle. The front of the enemy had already bowed. It

seemed like they would rout en masse at one more blow. That's right, at the centre, Wilm's force was waiting. If they were to attack, both wings would also begin to advance. Obviously Cynthia would obey that order, but the rear guard had no space to move to the front.

It would be stealing a march on everybody, but should I advance my corps a bit? I won't get in trouble for moving a little bit.

Disobeying orders was a crime, but in every province was the unwritten rule that it would be forgiven if it brought about great enough merit. Of the great men who had biographies written of them, the number of them who had disobeyed orders was high. There was risk involved in the crime, but it was otherwise difficult for someone young to gain merit.

"Okay."

Cynthia, pursing her lips, grasped her sword. Then, as she made her resolution, the moment she was about to issue her orders, from atop her horse, she felt her cloak pulled down.

"Gue…"

Her back hit the ground. Her armour protected her from serious injury, but in that moment, the shock was incredible. After scrunching up her face, her anger boiled to the surface. She stood in a rush to find the impudent one and roared.

"What are you doing!"

"Hey, you were about to disobey orders weren't you. There's nowhere to distinguish yourself here. I can see it in your face again~"

"D, do, d-d-d-don't say such…"

"I saw you shaking though…"

"Ahem, don't try to make jokes! This one would never disobey orders! More importantly, are you aware of what you have just done!?"

Noel was the perpetrator who had pulled Cynthia down with a carefree face, and she grabbed her by the collar. She was Noel's commanding officer. Her selfish antics

would normally have been okay, but at the moment, it was not. She had to dole out punishment.

“Captain Cynthia, please wait a moment before you strike. See, after all, if I disobey orders, it’ll be okay as long as I distinguish myself enough. It’s more fun that way, and it’ll surprise everyone.”

Noel took out a map of the battle formation from her bag and displayed it proudly. It was tremendously significant information that even Cynthia likely didn’t have. Where Noel, a Leader of Ten who shouldn’t have had access to it, had found it was a mystery. She would listen to what

Noel had to say for the moment, and so she released her grip on the girl.

“How, exactly, did you come into possession of something like that?”

“Hehe, I drew it myself. It’s my first attempt, but it turned out pretty good, didn’t it? I don’t know the commander’s name, or really understand it, so that area is a bit vague though.”

Looking at the plans, in the described area was lightly scrawled the somewhat unfitting Pochi house and Tama house. It was hard to believe, but that was unmistakably something that Noel would write. Noel closed one eye, gave an elated thumbs up, and once again began her explanation. There wasn’t a scrap of tension in her appearance.

“Where we are right now is here at the rear of the right wing, and the main body of the enemy is here, right? And then, to achieve victory, General Wilm’s company will advance from here. So, Captain Cynthia seemed like she was going to advance through the gap during the offensive, you know. You can’t reach the enemy from here after all.”

“H-hmmm… W-well, that is close—that isn’t— yes, well isn’t it okay to go forth?”

Cynthia was faltering, having been seen through. It was hard for her to honestly admit that she had wanted to advance to the front to raise her standing.

“So~ here is my question. Why is the enemy mindlessly fighting us here? They absolutely can’t win in a regular battle, right? They don’t have the same numbers and equipment after all. Even a monkey would know that.”

“Even knowing they will lose, there is a time it can’t be avoided. That is most likely their situation right now.”

Even at a disadvantage, there were some things that were unavoidable. Even if the rebel army was 100 000 strong, Cynthia would fight to the end for Coimbra. The enemy may have thought the same thing.

“That’s a lovely Cynthia-like opinion, eh. But not everybody is like that you know. There are loads of people out there who think to strike their enemy’s weak point after all.”

Everything had an opposite. Saying so, Noel pointed to a place on the map. It was the place on the map where the hill was that Noel Company had met the rebel army.

“Do you have something to say about that place?”

“Yup, earlier we met Fras… an enemy scout party there. Why were they there~ I wondered, and thought carefully about it too. If it wasn’t a landmark for a village raid, it was probably a preliminary investigation or something. For that crucial moment, you know.”

“What would be prepared for the crucial moment? Aah, you’re too roundabout!! Hurry up and state your conclusion!”

She couldn’t tolerate Noel when she put on airs and demanded that she state her thoughts.

“People like the Viceroy, and General Wilm might not have thought of it, but what if, when the whole army is committed, at that moment, the real body of troops comes crashing down like an avalanche? If that happens, we probably won’t be able to stop it, right?”

“W-what was that?”

“That’s what I’d do. If the Viceroy is killed, everyone will be shaken too. If a smaller force wants to win, it obviously will target the enemy commander from the start.”

Noel stabbed the location of the commander’s tent with the dirk she kept on her belt. It penetrated deeply into the location that Grohl occupied.

“B-but, aren’t you thinking too much? I don’t think they have the surplus to form a flying column to send though.”

Aside from being the enemy, they were no more than a muddled gang of bandits. It was unthinkable that they could have a plan. For the sake of being cautious, a scout party could be sent, but by the time they returned, the main offensive would have already started.

“I see. Yup. It might be like that. So, that was just me overthinking then.”

Quickly agreeing, Noel packed up the map. Surprised by the anticlimax, Cynthia added to the conversation with a complaint.

“Oi, you’re the one who said it, so don’t dismiss it so quickly. I know, to ward off that disaster, what should I do?”

“Um, shift your forces into the bushes at the base of the hill? If you form up to strike, you can kill the enemy with the momentum from a surprise attack. After that just wait for reinforcements, and the commander’s tent will remain safe.”

“…”

“This decision is up to Captain Cynthia. Well, I’m fine either way.”

Having said all that she wanted to say, Noel yawned, stretching both arms to the heavens. Her whole body bathed in sunlight; she seemed to be in a good mood.

Thinking carefully, Noel’s words do have a point; however, if it is reading too much into the situation, it would just end with disobeying orders.

She glared at the easterly hill. She couldn’t feel the presence of any enemies at all, but she also felt that a figure would appear as soon as the whole army was committed to attack. The enemy commander was a Baharan, so the potentiality that there was cavalry was high. She really didn’t think that they had the time to attack and retreat. It would be fine to report it to her commanding officer, but it would without a doubt be rejected. Preparations for the assault were already underway, and the mood was rising.

“What to do, what to do? Aah, what would be best!?”

“Hey, your thoughts are leaking out. You’re amusing like I thought, Cynthia.”

“Silence!”

“The weather’s nice today too. Whichever you choose, you probably won’t die. Yup, it’ll probably work out.”

Making baseless assertions, Noel performed a charming salute.

The hill east of the Kanan highway.

Ristih’s flying column had hidden themselves and were concealing their breaths atop their horses. As expected, the enemy had committed fully to the front. That was exactly as planned. He expected Grohl would bite without a doubt. Furthermore, Wilm, who had noticed the troops preparing an ambush, was pretending to have never realised it.

A loud trumpet sounded, and all their drums and chimes violently rang out. Wilm’s main force which was waiting in the centre of the Coimbra forces was preparing to advance. The accompanying wings too, triumphantly commenced their assault. There was no way the small fry bandits could halt the rising momentum of the Coimbra forces. The Red Circle Army’s corpses were piling up, and in a single moment, the situation had become dire for them. It appeared it would soon become a rout. Ristih nodded. His chance had come.

“All right, it is all going according to plan! Look, Coimbra’s main force is splendidly entering the trap! The target is their commander’s tent! It is going to be undermanned! Capture the foolish Grohl, our ultimate chance has come!”

Ristih, informing them so, raised the morale of the cavalry. The Red Circle battle flag was raised. For the moment it was nothing more than a symbol, but it would become the new provincial banner once he had conquered Coimbra. They only had to kill Grohl to complete their mission. After that, they would hand over the province to Amil, and Ristih would likely be given the title of next viceroy. The mouthpiece of the people suffering under oppression, Ristih, would become the hero who punished the incompetent Grohl with the death penalty. Geb flashed his teeth while stroking his beard.

“I didn’t think it would turn out exactly as planned until this point. It looks like you’ve been lucky, Ristih.”

“Hahaha, the will of heaven is with us. Geb, you go all out too. Let them know the might of the Baharan cavalry!”

“Leave it to me. Oi, Fraser and Kraft, you go all out too. If you take Grohl’s head, you’ll have the most merit. Not even knights or nobles can dream of that!”

“Yes, understood!”

“I, a noble? I, I’ll absolutely take the heads of many enemies!”

“Good answers, you two. Humans are boring when they don’t have ambition after all!”

Without receiving trouble from their horses, Fraser and Kraft had responded. They were in Geb’s unit and were a part of the flying column. They had themselves honestly chosen to go, and so they were greatly relieved, for if they had performed poorly, they might have been the ones being crushed [in the decoy group]. Furthermore, their hearts were pounding at the incredible chance that had arrived. Taking Grohl’s head would make nobility no longer a dream. If they could do that, their lives would be transformed. Fraser and the others were overflowing with ambition, drinking in the air, and waiting for their orders.

“When Geb’s unit separates from the vanguard, we charge! The target is in the commander’s tent; take Grohl’s head! Don’t even glance at the others!”

“Yeah!!”

“Red Circle Army, charge! TO OUR VICTORY!!”

The Coimbra army’s commander’s tent. Watching the course of the battle with an eyepiece, Grohl nodded in satisfaction. It was going eerily well. Both wings were annihilating the encircled enemy, and Wilm’s force was already beginning to advance. A great noise resounded; the impression of fife and drum reached his ears.

“This is the end for the rebel army. It seems like I’ve been able to save face at the last moment.”

“Yes, after we’ve finished the current business, we’ll strictly investigate the matter with Bahar. If we only have circumstantial evidence, the Bahar officials will cover it up.”

“Naturally. Amil won’t send a flattering envoy. With honeyed words we’ll raise the issue to father, and face the emperor early! We can’t let this chance go!”

Grohl struck his scabbard to the ground.

“If we can capture Ristih, the initiative will be ours. We have to capture him alive no matter what.”

“Yes, the gentlemen commanding the front also know this well, so…”

The official next to Grohl cut off his words. Thinking it to be strange, Grohl looked over to see the official’s throat pierced by an arrow and he [watched the man] die where he stood. Crumpling limply, the body convulsed in short spasms on the ground.

“W-what!?”

“Viceroy, it is an enemy attack from the east! The enemy cavalry is aiming for the headquarters!!”

“N-no way. L-like that is going to happen!”

“But, there is no mistaking it!”

“Fortify the defence! Don’t let the bandits approach your viceroy!”

The imperial guard immediately formed up and fortified the area around Grohl. The charging cavalry that bore the standard of the Red Circle was kicking up a cloud of dust as they descended. Not long after, arrows were flying. There were around five hundred [of them charging down the hill].

“S-stop, somehow stop them!!”

Grohl sent out orders, but the eastern guard had already been scattered. Because of the preparations for the total offensive, their defences had become too thin. The rebel army’s vile spear was carefully aimed at the Coimbra army’s weakest point. There was no one other than Grohl who would have been so lax as to not take up his shield. The

soldier's defencive position had easily been overrun, and the second line of defence had already been reached. Next would be the imperial guard that had fortified Grohl's perimeter. Drawing their swords with shaky hands, the nearby officials followed the orders of Perius whose voice was raised.

"T-to Wilm, send word to Wilm!! Light the signal to return, call him back with the horns!!"

"Viceroy, in the meantime, do not get involved! Wilm's force is already engaged with the enemy front! It would be wise to fall back to the commander's tent!"

"D-don't mess with me! Fleeing from rebel opponents, if I do that I'll be a laughing stock! This tent is my pride, and holds my personal banner you know!"

In the commander's tent, Grohl was signalling his orders with a flag, waving the Coimbra scales twice. It was not a banner that had been forged by the sword, and yet he hoisted it up. He would not allow the enemy to trample the banner; even less so when his enemies were mere rebels.

"Viceroy, your life is more important! So I will not allow bandits to take your life! Now quickly retreat!"

He shook off Perius who was forcefully removing him. There was no way he would run. He was the proud viceroy of Coimbra, Emperor Befnam's son. It was absolutely unforgivable to sully that honour.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up! I will absolutely not flee!"

"Viceroy!"

He shook off the obstruction of Perius who had grabbed his arm and raised his angry voice.

"Stop their advance here at all costs! Everyone, prepare yourselves! Let them know the might of the Coimbra forces!"

Grohl swung his sword down in an inspirational moment and received the final piece of bad news.

“Runner! The second wave of enemy cavalry is flooding in from the east! The garrison cannot hold out against a pincer, and the defencive lines have been overrun!!”

Grohl opened his eyes and turned them in that direction. New enemies were engaged in the fight, easily winning, as they swooped down without pause. In place of the dumbfounded Grohl, Perius gave orders.

“Whatever happens, defend the viceroy! If we buy time, reinforcements from the front will arrive!”

“Viceroy, stay behind us! We will protect your life at all costs!”

The imperial guard formed a front to become the final shield. They were mighty, yet, though the feeling was faint, it didn’t seem like they could hold out. The victory that had been before them was snatched away, only to be replaced by death.

Will I, a carrier of the blood of the house of Waldek, die here? Will I die in an unsightly way at the hands of bandits?

Grohl, as if he would collapse at any moment, strained all his might to stay standing.

The second wave of the cavalry that had swooped down in an instant from the easterly hill.

Ristih was leading the first wave which had already descended, and Geb, capable despite being a mercenary, had been given command of the second wave. Adding to their momentum was that their path was blocked by no man; the rear of the right wing had easily become undermanned in the total assault, and they were already breaking into the commander’s tent. The Coimbra garrison was being completely toyed with by the two stage surprise attack.

“Die, small fries!”

Geb rushed through, spearing some of the few remaining guards from atop his horse. He merged with the men from the first wave, and they turned to face the Coimbra standard. Ristih was waiting in the rear. Things had progressed frighteningly well.

“We can do it, after all.”

Geb nodded at what was certainly good windfall. He figured that with some training, the rebels could become some fairly useful soldiers. Geb had the ability to see a person's true ability, so he knew who to bring with him and who to not make into an enemy. To live as long as he had, Geb had continued winning, and he would continue to do so. Ned had been quite useful, though he was already dead. He didn't want to meet the one who had killed him. Never facing a strong opponent head on was another secret to survival. In those situations, thinking up a surprise attack was a good method of attaining victory. A fight was neither fair nor underhanded.

Noel seemed like an interesting one though. Now then, I wonder if she's alive.

Heroic soldiers were blocking the way, standing with their spears to guard the tent. Their equipment was of a different quality, so they were most likely imperial guardsmen. That meant that the man who had gone pale behind them was Viceroy Grohl. His head was worth a great deal. With their momentum, most of the soldiers had left for the offencive, leaving the most important man unprotected. There was value in how incompetent their supreme commander was. If he was attacked and killed, the soldiers' morale would plummet; even more so if he was their viceroy. He was not someone they should have easily allowed onto a battlefield. They had to be incompetent to not realise that. Geb snickered.

Be it incompetence, or whatever, that viceroy's head is highly valuable. I'd love to receive a mountain of money!

He lit a flame as a signal to his subordinates and to further increase the chaos. To penetrate the defences in a single stroke, he flourished his spear, striking down the enemies that had gathered near him. It didn't matter if they were imperial guards. If the enemy was hesitant, he'd surge forward like a wave against the shore.

"Kill, kill!! Kill them with whatever you can grab! Grohl's head is just a short ways away!! Take it and you'll be rewarded all you want!"

He casually approached as the enemy spears thrust at him. A strong shock impacted his hands. As though waltzing through small fries, Geb struck each one down in a single blow.

"You bastard!"

Spontaneously, blood flew, and, pulling his spear back, from atop his horse, he thrust down with both hands. Again, his blow was received. Geb displayed the spearmanship of a veteran from Bahar.

“You won’t receive it a second time!! You aren’t a small fry, are you, you bastard!”

Geb reflexively glanced at the small fry’s face. The small fry wore the standard Coimbra uniform, armour, and helmet. It wasn’t an imperial guard uniform, but, without a doubt, the small fry was more skilled than an imperial guardsman. Red hair peeked out from under the helmet. The happily grinning face matched one from his memories.

“Are you… Noel!?”

“Yup.”

“You’re as plucky as ever…”

As he was shouting that, he felt a pain in his abdomen. Shocked, he gazed down at two puncture wounds that had injured his organs. Red fluids were spilling out. He hadn’t remembered being negligent, but that thought was naive. Noel’s blow had been too well executed for that. It gave him a hint of what had led up to Ned’s death as he began to feel sluggish. He was out of luck. His organs had been ruptured, and with the taste of a feeling he hated more than words could describe, he vomited blood.

It was hot. The burning heat seemed to spread through his abdomen; no, it did not only seem to, but was actually burning him. His body was tinged with an almost incandescent red, and the stench of burning flesh clogged his nose. His vision dyed scarlet, and the earsplitting sound of his own wheezing could be heard, emitted against his will. The memory of first feeling the pain had already become dull; muscle, bone, viscera, brain, the places in pain were able to recognise clearly that they were burning. It would soon end.

“B-burning? Haha, what happened? Why would my body burn…”

“It’s mysterious, eh? I don’t really know why either. It’s a spear that can produce flames; well, it isn’t normal. There was talk of it being a miracle product, but it’s probably fake.”

“Hahahaha, burn, it’s burning, m-my body, body… Gah!”

“Hey, what exactly is this spear? While I go over there, why don’t we think about it? Of course, I will too. So?”

Noel didn’t receive an answer to her question. Geb’s eyes were melting with the fever, and reddish brown fluids were spurting rather than flowing from his mouth. Noel survived a victor, and Geb died defeated. As expected it seemed difficult to keep winning all the time, but it seemed like it might have been a good way to continue to survive. It gave off that sort of impression. If that was true, she’d surely one day grasp happiness. Geb, who had taught her that important truth, had died, but there was no helping it. He had been an enemy after all. That was also why she had killed Ned. It was why she would kill Kraft and Fraser. They were no longer allies.

“Heave-ho.”

Noel thrust her bident even more, lifting Geb’s remains off of his horse. Hoisting it like a banner, the body was engulfed in a violent blaze, and the stench of the corpse was carried with the black smoke as it spread. Silence filled the surrounding area in an instant, and it became as if time had stopped. Friend and foe alike were speechless as they could not help but turn their eyes to the young girl who bore the flame.

“Sir Cynthia; Leader of Ten, Noel has killed the enemy cavalry commander, Geb!!”

“Eh?”

“The next wave is coming! Don’t be distracted!! Form up with your spears!! Aim for the horses, and crush them!! Everyone, protect Lord Grohl!!”

Changing her words to rebuke them harshly, Noel jumped onto the horse Geb had been riding. Taking up her trumpet, she signalled an attack. Following that, the soldiers of Noel Company also continued on in high spirits. When the call of the trumpet died down, the screams and cries of the enemy soldiers echoed across the battlefield. After Mirut too rushed in with his spear, the dumbfounded guards also began to comply with Noel’s order, having become swept up in the momentum.

“What an unbelievable girl!”

Cynthia urged her horse onwards as she rushed the rebel forces before her. Everything had gone as Noel had predicted. In the end, Cynthia had ignored her orders to remain on standby and had gone to prepare against an enemy surprise attack. Noel Company had gone ahead and waited near the commander’s tent, having been sent

there to minimise the enemy impact. Cynthia's group was to strike the enemy in the flank. Countering the surprise attack with another surprise attack had gone exactly as Noel had predicted. Although they hadn't been able to repulse the first wave, they had somehow managed to keep Grohl alive. It was true that the commander with the initiative could take the offensive and force his opponent into a state of confusion.

Thoughts of Noel's proud face passed through her mind. Her usual way of speaking was flippant and did not elicit much trust, but she had perfectly read her opponent. Had Cynthia been by herself, there was no way she would have realised the enemy planned on assaulting the commander's tent.

Just who is that Noel anyway! I think she says some foolish things, but she has fearsome foresight. I really can't understand why that is!

Idiotic hesitation over whether to attack the enemy cavalry or respond to their attack had halted her feet. The initiative that Geb gained by leading the charge had also gotten him killed. Noel's warcry had yet to reach her location. Killing the enemy general would cause not only enemy morale to drop, but also allied morale to rise. It was also a taboo to stop advancing during a surprise attack. The weapons of the cavalry were impact and maneuvrability. If those weapons were unusable, the situation would be beyond saving; therefore, it was important to determine the success of a charge in advance and to quickly order the withdrawal. Everyone knew that much, but it was difficult to judge when actually watching combat. From the start, the evidence for such a surprise attack had been driven home. In the place where they were soon to seize victory, there was nobody who would call for withdrawal.

"Damn, this wasn't how it was planned! The tent was supposed to be practically empty!"

"Damn bandits, I can see you bastards' plan! Throw down your swords honourably, there's no way for you to win!"

"Shaddup right now!! At least I can kill you fuckers!"

The horse mounted rebel stabbed at Cynthia. Calmly observing him, she chopped off his arm and stabbed his torso. She could hear a trumpet from the direction of the commander's tent. The present state had become that of a pincer attack. Noel was directing the defence of the tent while Cynthia led the flanking maneuvre. It was very

likely that the rebel leader Ristih was present. If he could be captured, the rebellion would be ended.

“Take their heads! They’re just bandits, so their lives don’t matter! Our target is their general, Ristih! Capture him as alive as possible!!”

To completely destroy the enemy which was in chaos, Cynthia raised her sword and gave her orders.

“Haaah, haah, shit, fuck!”

Without care for the enemy’s thoughts, Ristih butted in as his flying column had fallen into a panicked state. The momentum of the attack had petered out, and they had been lodged in by an enemy that had prepared for a pincer. It was unlikely that the incompetent Grohl had prepared an ambush. Wilm may have figured it out, but he was guaranteed to be on the front lines. That meant that somebody with a brain had done something unnecessary. Ristih chewed on his thumbnail.

“Sir Ristih, let’s fall back! I can’t imagine we’ll be able to break through much longer!”

“Where are we supposed to fall back to!? We won’t even buy much time by retreating to Rockbell!”

“B-Bahar, let’s go home!”

“Such foolishness! There’s no way they’d let us in! Right now we’re in the Red Circle Army!”

Ristih had ignored his orders to prolong the rebellion and had instead marched on the capital. There was no way that defeat would be forgiven. All that waited if they returned to Bahar was death, so they had nothing left to do but continue the attack.

Ristih stayed his feet and raised his spear. More so than when Geb died while leading the vanguard, if the momentum of the cavalry was killed, they would truly begin to feel the effects of the pincer attack. Leaving aside those directly employed by Bahar, the mercenaries were already losing nerve. They were far above the small fries in terms of skill, but they had not a fragment of loyalty to their employer. If they thought their orders were too dangerous, it seemed like they would quickly escape. To ensure a rout would not happen, he could not doubt for a moment that they would one day achieve victory.

“Everyone, raise your spirits once more! Grohl’s head is just ahead, not far away! We can break through this level of defence in one push!”

“Eh, isn’t that already impossible though?”

Paired with the sun’s pretty rays, a single horseman slowly approached. It was a Coimbra soldier dyed fully in red, and she had already come into range.

“The pathetic Coimbra army is trying to say something!”

Gripping his spear, he unleashed a shining thrust that had been admired even in Bahar. After only that much, his blade was caught. Confused, he tried to wrench it free, but it still did not budge.

“What!?”

“Pretty fast for a general.”

“R-release it!”

“If I kill you, the merit will be halved. So, I’ll let you live for now.”

“I won’t let such a low ranked soldier look down on me!”

Releasing his spear, Ristih drew his sword from behind him; however, he could not get it out of its scabbard. He felt a great impact in his right shoulder and fell off his horse with the overbearing pain. The surrounding Baharan soldiers took up their swords to protect him, but they were killed, their breasts pierced.

“Just to confirm this, you are Ristih, leader of the Red Circle Army, right? It’d be pretty bad if I’d mistaken you. You just introduced yourself, so I doubt I’m wrong.”

Not paying attention to her surroundings, the female Coimbra soldier stepped down from her horse. It felt like he could escape, but if he tried anything, he would forfeit his life. Surrounding her with spears from horseback was possible, but not for with the current state that the cavalry had fallen into.

“W-who are you?”

“My name is Noel. I’ve seen you once before at Zoim village though.”

“Z-Zoim village? That village was supposed to be under our control? So, why the Coimbra military…”

“Cause it seemed more fun that way. That, and I didn’t want to be a disposable pawn. You only saw us as pawns, right? I really hate being viewed like that.”

Saying that, Noel reached back and took up her war hammer with a firm grip. She was smiling, but on the inside she felt ready to boil over. If she hadn’t met Cynthia in that fort, she couldn’t have joined the Coimbra military. She would have been placed on the front lines of the decoy corps as an ornamental stone. The lives of the people of Coimbra were only as valuable as pebbles to them. In truth, the decoy corps that had been sent by the main force of the rebel army had simply been an aside. The rebels had thrown down their swords, raised up their cries, and were beginning to rout. Corpses littered the area with arrows pinned to their backs. It was truly a dreadful scene.

“W-wait. Listen! Somebody think about who is really in the wrong! The cause of the misgovernment, the cause of your suffering, think of the one behind it all! If you leave me here, then…”

“Shut up.”

Noel swung her hammer down on Ristih’s right knee, totally pulverising it. While he was screaming, to finish it off, she crushed his left knee as well, leaving him crippled. The pain was so great that Ristih lost consciousness, frothing at the mouth. After violently kicking Ristih’s helmet away, she took him by the hair and dragged his limp body away. The soldiers brandishing their weapons around her did not take any action. No, they could not take action. Noel’s bident was dripping with blood as she held it. The gently swaying, evil bident gave off an aura almost as if it was searching for new prey. Each one knew that the instant his stance shifted in an attempt to help Ristih, the bident would thrust into his throat, and so, not a single one moved.

“I-it’s a demon.”

“A devil in h-human skin.”

“Ignoring your own actions, you guys say some nasty things, you know.”

Noel, sporting a bitter smile, observed her surroundings without negligence.

While she was doing so, “Noel are you safe!? Sorry for coming late!”

Cynthia and the others were finally approaching, having thrashed the enemy at the commander’s tent. At that moment, the mercenaries broke free from their temporary paralysis and began to flee at full speed. There were some who threw down their arms to surrender. No longer waiting for reinforcements, the course of the battle had already been fixed.

Dragging along the fainted Ristih, Noel looked up to Cynthia atop her horse, and confirmed, “I’ve properly kept him alive, you know.”

“Is that man Ristih? Did you defeat him by yourself?”

“Yup, I remembered his face after all. I confirmed it once too, so there is no doubt it’s him.”

“I, I see. Well done.”

Cynthia praised her, though her face twitched. She turned over the corpses of the enemy soldiers which were not few in the area. Among them was a charred corpse. The villagers that Noel had been leading were silently huddling together with Mirut a short distance away. There was no way that they had created the corpses. In summary, Noel had: taken down Geb, the commander with the initiative; whittled down the cavalry’s morale before finally destroying it; and captured the rebel leader Ristih.

“Captain Cynthia, quickly announce your victory. If you do that, this battle will quickly end.”

“B-but…”

The one who had captured Ristih was Noel, and Cynthia hesitated to take credit for it.

“Mirut, sound the drums and chimes. I’ll play my trumpet. This way Captain Cynthia’s status can be raised.”

After saying so, Noel let out a resounding sound from her trumpet. It was the tune of victory. As she continued, though Mirut was still confused, he began to beat his drums. It felt as though not only those around the commander’s tent, but all the soldiers across the battlefield turned their eyes to the sound.

“Is it really okay?”

“Of course. I’ve already done it so it’s all good.”

Cynthia nodded, took a deep breath, and called out in a voice that could be heard across the entire Kanan highway.

“Cynthia’s troops have captured the rebel leader Ristih for the Coimbra army!! This battle has ended with our victory!!”

One beat behind her proclamation, a cheer rose from the Coimbra army. It was clear to see upon whom the goddess of victory had smiled that day.

Chapter 12
Evil Surrounds

Grohl, victorious in the battle on the highway, planned to continue to pursue the fleeing rebels northward to recapture Rockbell. The rebel army, having already been routed, could no longer put up a suitable fight, so the area controlled by Rockbell would almost unbelievably easily return to Coimbran rule. Having heard from the citizens of Rockbell the sorts of atrocities that the rebels had committed, Grohl had already ordered the execution of all prisoners.

“Leaving aside if, for example, Bahar was behind it all, the gross injustice of rising up against one’s fellow countrymen absolutely cannot be forgiven. Do not have a shred of sympathy, and strike them down! Kill those bandits who escaped today if you have to hunt them to the ends of the earth!”

“Viceroy, please wait for a short while. Your anger may be too much for the heart to bear, but there is no use arguing against the reasons that you cannot kill them all.”

Perius, a civil official, admonished Grohl’s overly excessive method. While it was certainly true that the wages for the crimes committed in Rockbell were death, simply ordering a mass execution without taking into account the state of the troops would not serve to fully uproot the remaining evil.

“Shut up, Perius! After seeing that wretched scene, how dare you say such a thing!”

Grohl placed his hand on the sword that hung from his waist, infuriated that someone would defend the rebels, but Perius responded indifferently.

“Then, those who were captured in Rockbell will be executed on top of having experienced the horrors of the sacking. How about a plan to provide clemency to those who participated in a rebellion that could not be stopped? Of course, each would be individually judged, and I think that, where appropriate, conscription would be a suitable punishment.”

“And let them slip through my hands!? Originally, the participation in a rebellion was already a heinous crime. If I’m too soft on them now, a second disaster shall arise!”

“Despite the fear it would cause, that isn’t quite right.”

“What exactly is wrong!?”

“There is evidence that the majority of those who joined the rebellion did so under duress. Indeed, Ristih is the one most deserving of punishment, there is no mistaking that. If the Viceroy is to behead even these pitiful souls, will not that very fact cause a second, or even a third rebellion?”

Grohl hesitated to the end, yet—not for Perius’ sake, but because the other officials were also of the same opinion—he withdrew his plan to execute every rebel. If the remaining rebels obediently surrendered, then they could all be given the gift of clemency, and an announcement was made, absolving all those villages that had fallen under the influence of the rebel army.

At first there were many who were suspicious of deception, but as the truth of the proclamation came to be known, the soldiers of the Red Circle Army surrendered to Coimbra one after the other. Because their leader Ristih had been captured, and because there was no one else in the Red Circle Army capable of command, the Red Circle Army had already collapsed as a military. Most of the surrendered were spared so that they could return to their villages, but there were exceptions: the ones who had subdued Rockbell. The surviving citizens had not forgotten the faces of the pillagers, and their hatred spewed forth as they enumerated their various crimes. After the hearing, an informal trial briefly usurped Coimbra’s state law, and all the prisoners of war held in Rockbell were given the same sentence: decapitation.

Cynthia and Noel were cautiously walking through the streets of Rockbell, which was once again flying the Coimbra scales. It appeared that their mission was to be on watch for any remaining refugees in the city, and they were accompanied by several soldiers. In fact, it was simply that Noel had found herself some free time and had suggested that they go on a stroll.

“Awww, it’s even more abandoned than the city, isn’t it. Nothing’s interesting…”

“It’s recently been brutally pillaged so it can’t be helped. Still, it is a tragedy that this could be done by fellow countrymen, hometown aside. I still have a hard time believing it.”

Cynthia furled her eyebrows as she gazed upon the city of scattered rubble. The clearing of corpses had yet to be completed, and the stench was yet dreadful still. The

eyes of the girls who sat there were dull, and the faces of the men bore only hatred and sorrow. Nowhere to be seen was there any trace of what had been, only one week before, a beautiful city.

“You say fellow countrymen, but they’d never met, or even spoken to each other before, right?”

“But…”

“More so than killing one person whose face you recognise, I think it’s relatively easy to kill several hundred that you don’t know. After all, it isn’t long before you forget.”

“That isn’t true! You’re being way too extreme!”

“Is that so~. I don’t really care what happens to people I don’t know, so aren’t other people like that too? That’s why everybody can be so cruel, you know. Well, such is the way of the world, and it can’t be helped, eh?”

Noel was gently smiling. Compared to her usual smiles, something cold seemed to be present.

“Wha-what can’t be helped!? That sort of behaviour can never be forgiven! We… humans are not beasts!”

“Yup. So from now on I’ll execute those beasts as a proud human, okay.”

Noel lightly tapped her finger, and nodded conclusively.

“Could it be that you want to defend the criminals? Like I said, those sorts of things…”

“Eh? I don’t want to help them at all though…”

Noel’s response was pointedly indifferent.

Jeers and angry voices steadily grew louder in the direction of the plaza. Cynthia turned to walk in that direction, and Noel casually followed along. There were several Coimbran soldiers in the plaza who had created an impromptu execution ground. Lining its perimeter were the people of Rockbell. Their angry jeers and harsh tones were directed endlessly at the rebel soldiers. With them was the figure of the Kraft from Zoim. Kraft had taken part in the push for the commander’s tent along with

Fraser, but he had fled to Rockbell as he had been separated from Fraser during the melee, and, therefore, had no idea what to do. As the rebel corpses piled up, Kraft's imminent death loomed ever nearer. Though he had been drunk on blood and violence, at heart he remained a coward. There was no way he could have mustered the will to fight to the bitter end. When Coimbra had descended upon Rockbell, he had been the first to throw down his sword and surrender.

Cynthia, Noel, and the accompanying soldiers split the crowd as they entered the execution grounds. Mirut had been ill at ease, and so had followed Noel on her walk. Noticing them, the garrison troops straightened up and saluted.

"Good work Commander of One Hundred Cynthia!"

"Yes, good work. We are currently on watch. Have you encountered anything abnormal?"

"No sir, not in particular! There is one rather loud POW, but he won't be noisy much longer."

Looking in the direction that the soldier was indicating, they saw the site at which criminals were brought to the guillotine. They did not hear any cries, and once the prisoner had been restrained, the executioner held his axe as he waited for orders.

"N-no, help me! I'm really just a normal farmer! Please spare me!"

"Death to the guilty!"

"Kill the enemy!"

At the angry voices of the crowd, the guillotine's blade swiftly fell. The rebel's head rolled forward into the bucket they had prepared for it, and blood was spewing from the body that remained. The soldiers quickly removed it, and brought forward the next criminal. The next one was unusually large, and it took several men to restrain him.

"O-oi Noel, that, isn't that Kraft? Look, with that face and that huge build there's no mistake!"

Mirut let out a loud voice.

Having heard it, Kraft begged loudly for mercy, crying, “Ah, aaah!! It’s Mirut and Noel right! P-please help me! I’m pleading for my life! At this rate, at this rate they’ll kill me!”

“Noel, do you know him?”

“Yup, he was an ally once, so I know him I guess. He’s Kraft from Zoim village, but he’s an enemy now so it doesn’t matter.”

Noel didn’t express much interest, and gave an indifferent response. She was so cold that Mirut found himself unwittingly yelling at her.

“O-oi! Wasn’t he also *forced* into participating in the rebel army!? Sir Cynthia, can’t you do something to save him!?”

“If it wasn’t for what happened to Rockbell, I probably could have. All the rebels here are forbidden clemency by the order of the viceroy. Unfortunately, my authority is not enough to spare him. Not only that, I doubt I’d be able to persuade the crowd.”

Cynthia shook her head. If they untactfully pardoned anyone, the wrath of the people would likely turn on Coimbra. That was why it was best to ruthlessly sacrifice all the prisoners captured in the city. There was also no mistaking that he had been one who had violently pillaged and slaughtered as much as he could. She held no sympathy for him.

“That… Hey, Noel, are you really going to just watch him die!?”

“It can’t be helped, Mirut, because Kraft made his choice and lost. And it’s also true that he did some terrible things to the people here. So I think it can’t be helped that they take revenge, right?

“It, it can’t be helped?”

“Then, Mirut, if your precious little sister Cal had been tortured and killed, would you still say the same thing?”

“Tha-that’s…”

“Well, would you say the same thing? Would you?”

"…"

Noel's smile vanished and she expressionlessly watched Mirut. She knew his response, but after hearing that, had he understood how out of place his suggestion had been? Or had he not put much thought into it at all? Cynthia could not understand him. She did, however, think what Noel had said was correct. Those who commit atrocities had to be prepared to receive just payment. If the rebels wished to avoid that fate, they had no choice but to continue winning. That was why the defeated Kraft was being given his reward.

"Hate the sin, not the sinner, eh? Those are incredibly kind words from some country somewhere, but it's difficult to actually do, isn't it? After all, you can't just tell yourself to stop hating."

Noel looked up at Mirut's face, telling him second hand information.

"Sorry Kraft. You have done some things that no person should ever do. So I can't help you after all."

With a face like he had just bitten something sour, Mirut averted his gaze.

"No! No, I don't want to die! Please h-help me!!"

Kraft was forced to the guillotine, but, due to his large build, his head did not properly fit. Furthermore, as he was struggling with all his might, his head did not line up cleanly with the guillotine's blade. The soldiers and the executioner hurriedly put all their weight behind their efforts to restrain him.

"…"

"Let's go, Noel. We don't need to watch to the end."

Cynthia, worried about Noel, suggested they distance themselves from the area, but Noel's legs didn't seem willing to move.

"Hey, Cynthia."

"What?"

Noel expressionlessly watched Kraft struggle and asked, “Kraft, do you want me to kill you?”

“Don’t say that. You don’t need to burden yourself with unnecessary sins. Killing a former companion is something you’ll have to bear far into the future.”

“One more won’t change anything. Come on, may I?” Noel earnestly requested.

It didn’t seem like he could be coaxed into compliance, or fully pacified. Cynthia, after some deliberation, nodded.

“Thanks.”

Noel drew the hammer from her belt and carefully approached the guillotine. The hammer that was as large as a sword held great weight. After lightly flourishing it, she tightened her grip.

“Hey, can I come over there?”

“Wh-what are you…”

“I am Noel, Leader of Ten. See, here’s my insignia.”

“P-pardon me! We’ll quickly subdue him, so please wait a moment!”

“I’ll do it after you’re done, so I’ll just come a little closer.”

“That’s…”

“Cynthia, Commander of One Hundred, gave her approval, so…”

Pushing his way past the soldiers, having been released from his constraints, Kraft rushed to Noel’s feet.

“Help me, Noel. I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die!”

“Yup, I’m helping you now. See, raise your face and look me in the eyes.”

Kraft looked up with tears streaming down his face. He couldn’t see her face well, for the sun’s rays that shone into his eyes. A cold hand gently brushed aside his tears. It

gave off a chillingly icy feeling. Kraft's raging agitation died down. It was as though he had never heard her mention her intent to kill him. All he could hear was his own breathing, and Noel's voice.

He grasped Noel's left hand, which had been on his cheek, in both of his own, "Uuuu, thanks, really, thank you, Noel. Why did I do those terrible things? Surely, I was different somehow back then."

"It's okay now, soon you won't be afraid anymore… okay, Kraft?

"Noel?"

"Bye bye."

In the rays of the sun, Noel's face softened. It was the last thing that Kraft saw. The hand behind Noel's back brought the hammer crashing down on Kraft's skull. At the same time that the sound of crushing could be heard, chunks of his brain scattered like the contents of a fruit had burst open. Soon thereafter, as Noel basked in the sun, she became dyed with splotches of red and fragments of brain. Seeing her lurid figure, the once menacing throng too, had their breath taken away. Glancing once at them in a bored manner, Noel returned to Cynthia.

"Thanks, Cynthia. Ahaha, that was a bit soft, eh?"

"You're… really different."

While she seemed about to say, 'You're absolutely mad,' Cynthia hurriedly changed her words. After mopping up Noel's face with a handkerchief, she waved to the soldiers and left. There were still plenty of criminals remaining. If they lingered much longer, it seemed as though it would cause an uproar, and she wanted to leave before that happened. Cynthia did not have the intention of letting them see any more than what they had of that kind of scene.

"Hey…"

"What is it, Mirut?"

Mirut asked in a quivering voice, "If I had been in that position, would you have mercilessly smashed my skull?"

He had received quite a shock at Kraft's death. It was likely that because he was still a young man he had never had a person close to him die.

"Not at all. Because you're a companion after all."

"What does that mean?"

"I will absolutely never fail my companions. So if it seemed like you were going to die, I think I'd help. Yup, I'd have definitely helped. But Kraft was an enemy, you know. There's no need to help the enemy after all."

"…"

Noel said what she pleased as if it was obvious in response. She probably couldn't give Mirut a clear answer. That was because he strongly felt it was strange to be able to unhesitatingly kill other people, let alone an acquaintance.

"Oh yeah, speaking of that. You get it too, right Mirut?"

"Get what?"

"What happens if you don't find happiness. Yeah, I don't want to be like that, so I'm searching for the way to become happy. That's why we should search together, Mirut."

Noel was smiling.

I see, thought Cynthia, and she felt that her understanding of why Noel was so particular about finding happiness had become a little deeper. The girl did not understand what happiness was, and so she had fixated herself on discovering the methods of attaining happiness. To her it was likely that being unable to find happiness was akin to the cruelest of deaths.

While she unexpectedly felt that she might pity her, Cynthia derided herself by reminding herself that she was no different. She had become a knight to protect the prestige of her noble name; she took up the sword even though she was a woman. Of course she intended to be loyal to the viceroy, but the root of it all was the protection of her own self respect. It was a truly shallow motive. Cynthia was particular about the way of maintaining honour and pride. There was not much of a difference between herself and Noel.

I thought myself to be a suitable knight, but Noel's way is better than my own. I know because I've been defeated by the girl.

Noel looked at her, her expression asking if something was wrong, and Cynthia forced a smile that said that there wasn't a problem. Kraft's face, when he had been executed earlier, for some reason, floated through her mind. Noel claimed that was how people would end up if unable to find happiness, but was there really nobody who would try to save that young man in the end? At the very least, he had died painlessly. Cynthia thought that, in the world, dying with peace of mind was not particularly a happy thing.

Grohl left guards in Rockbell, and returned to Coimbra's capital. Having only been driven into a corner for a brief amount of time, he had safely exterminated the rebellion, succeeding so far as to capture the rebel leader, Ristih, alive. The victory could not be more complete. He hadn't been in as good a mood since just after his viceroy inauguration ceremony. He promptly summoned his retainers to hold the ceremony in recognition of merit during the recent subjugation war. It was originally abnormal to so greatly praise contributors in a subjugation, but he aimed to emphasise how Bahar had been backing the rebels. Having splendidly crushed their plans, he wished to strongly appeal to the viceroys of the other provinces and to his father, the current reigning emperor. He had already dispatched messengers to bring Amil's mistake to each province's attention. Next it was his turn; Grohl was incredibly enthusiastic, for having overcome his predicament, it was no longer just a dream that he could regain his position as the next emperor.

The Conferral of Honours awarded Wilm for routing the rebel army, and Grohl personally commented on each commander's merits, handing each a letter of commendation. Cynthia and Noel, who would not normally be allowed in, had managed to be present. They had received invitations from Grohl to attend at the castle. Cynthia was nervous once again, and her face had become stiff. Noel looked good in her favourite glasses.

"Commander of One Hundred, Cynthia Edrich. It is true that you disobeyed orders and abandoned your post, but had you not galloped in, my life may have been forfeited. With heartfelt gratitude, I applaud your work."

"Y-yes, sir. I-I'm gratefully, happy!"

“Your late father would be proud. For your meritorious actions, you have been elevated to the position of Senior Commander of One Hundred. Also, I award you this silver crown medal. From now on please work well for both my and Coimbra’s sake.”

The imperial guard respectfully handed her a medal engraved with her rank emblem, a balance scale, and a crown. Cynthia stiffly received it and saluted, blushing.

“F-from now on, I v-vow to work with complete devotion for the sake of the both the viceroy and Coimbra!!”

“That is good. Now, there is one more who has done work like we’ve never seen before. Leader of Ten, Noel, please come here.”

Grohl’s beckoning was remonstrated by Wilm, who was making a wry face.

“With all due respect, the birth of that one is unknown. Perhaps we should not be so unguarded.”

“Hahaha, you’re worrying again, Wilm. If she’s aiming to take my head, there is surely a better time! Noel, don’t hold back, and come over!”

Laughing, Grohl urged her on. Beside the throne, his son Elgar was waiting, watching Noel’s composure that had come out of nowhere. Noel subtly waved at him, and the edges of Elgar’s mouth rose into a smile. Glasses Noel completely looked like a different person, and Cynthia was, without a doubt, partially relieved. Noel walked slowly before Grohl, and docilely knelt. Cynthia watched it all with an incredibly worried gaze. Considering her unreserved personality, she was anxious about what Noel might do. If she was rude to the viceroy, it was likely she’d receive the death penalty. She could do nothing but pray that Noel continued to be docile.

“At first I could only see you as a regular civil official, and never expected you to have such martial skill. In my army, maybe only one or two can contend with your prowess. I am truly grateful.”

For Grohl, not one to praise retainers, it was unusual. So surprised were the retainers that they unintentionally began to murmur. Grohl was a moody man who was quick to show his emotions, and he would let his grumbling and faultfinding slip from his mouth. He was of good birth, so he never approved of people, and a sense of superiority was constantly overflowing from his whole body. When things were going well he had the ability to captivate people, but at a single mistake he was arrogant

beyond belief. That was why he had mostly lost the loyalty of his retainers. All eyes converged on Noel, Leader of Ten, whom Grohl so unreservedly praised.

“This one, a lone horseman, killed the enemy captain who held the initiative, and disrupted the enemy cavalry. Not only that, I saw her capture the detestable rebel leader, Ristih, alive. I witnessed that scene with my own eyes. I can personally guarantee that your martial ability is not a normal level.”

Kneeling, Noel accepted the gratitude, “Thank you very much. Your kind words are too great an honour.”

“I have heard that your efforts also played a role in the rescue of Sara and Elgar. Were it not for this most recent situation, that alone would have most likely been a great thing. If it is alright with you, would you be willing to serve Coimbra as a knight? I have prepared the position of commander of one hundred for you.”

At Grohl’s words, the room was filled with uproar. To give not only the status of a commander of one hundred, but also the status of knighthood to a girl of dubious birth was an exception among exceptions. Her youth aside, Cynthia too fell into that category, but she was succeeding her father’s title. Noel had no backers, and only a month had passed since she had begun to serve.

“Despite those words, suddenly promotions could cause a disruption in the army. Furthermore, suddenly granting knighthood is too reckless. It would be best for now if Noel, Leader of Ten, focused on gaining experience.”

A civil official remonstrated him, but Grohl kicked it aside.

“That’s idiotic. What we need now is not propriety, but ability. This one’s outstanding martial prowess is something that I want. Well, Noel? I don’t think it is a bad offer.”

Noel raised her head, and after thinking for some time, she nodded, “I will gladly accept.”

“I see, you’ll lend your services, eh! Well then, you can accept this rank insignia, and silver crown medal.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That, and as a knight you are permitted to have a surname. Do you have any ideas? If not I can give you some time to think.”

“Vosheit. I would like to be named Noel Vosheit.”

Noel had not appeared to think too hard before coming up with a name.

“Sir Noel Vosheit, then. Quite the meaningful surname. All right, so we can end the ceremony, Cynthia can inform you of the details. I have great expectations for your work.”

“Thank you very much!”

Noel stood, and after a dashing salute, returned to beside Cynthia. Her briskly walking form was a different person after all, and Cynthia was only able to incline her head. The thought that if this was Noel’s true self, she wouldn’t be able to banter with her floated through her head. If that was the case she could nod her approval at Noel seeing through the enemy plan. Cynthia determined to find out for sure this time.

“Now the conferral of honours is over! Ristih, who we’ve captured, has talked about everything in regards to the conspiracy and its reliance on Bahar before being executed. I’ve said this before, but in the next several months our lot is likely to change greatly.”

“Viceroy, what exactly are you talking about?”

A civil official enquired, his face in a scowl. He thought he knew, but he did not yet have confirmation.

“What we already know. If Bahar only observed our troubles, it would have been fine. We cannot allow Amil to evade the hammer I will bring down on him!”

However firm the evidence they had gotten from Ristih was, Bahar would do no less than deny all knowledge of the events. The emperor and the provincial viceroys might only slightly lessen Amil’s good reputation in their gossip. Grohl, however, had no intentions of using the events to raise his own reputation. He was not motivated by things like boastfulness and pride, but by the fact that Amil had aimed for his wife and child. He had to repay Amil; that determination had already been made, and he continued to harden his heart. That was right, it was a war with Bahar. Not a minor skirmish, it had become a brutal contest to see which one would claim his place as the

next emperor. The winner would rise to the position of emperor, and the loser would fall to ruin.

There was likely no way that his father Befnam would intervene until a large number of people were involved. There was no doubt that Befnam knew Bahar had backed the rebels. He probably tolerated it because he knew it was a plot to remove a political opponent; however, his faith in Amil, who had failed with the rebellion, should have lowered. It was true that Befnam loved Amil, but that was only because he saw great promise in him. Grohl too had been favoured before his failure as viceroy of Coimbra. In summary, if Grohl could show how he surpassed Amil, he could steal the position of future emperor. If one of his sons was to die, as long as peace in Horsheido remained, Befnam would be satisfied. From what he had experienced so far, Grohl understood that to the point of disgust.

“V-Viceroy! You’d be reckless! We and the Bahar administration are both of the same empire, and we are brethren! To turn your sword on…”

“The same empire? Brethren? Whose people do you think were sacrificed for those bastards’ plan!? I need to have the will to teach that fool a lesson! Listen up, theorise every possible scenario and train zealously! The days when my Coimbra had a weak military are tales from the past!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

“With that, you’re dismissed for today!”

Grohl stood up, hurling harsh words, and his retainers made a myriad of faces as they saluted. There were those whose faces flushed with excitement, those whose faces turned a deep blue, those whose mouths curled upwards with schemes, and Cynthia who seemed about to faint from the tension. Then there was Noel. Having endured the long meeting, her eyes teared up as she let out a great yawn. Fortunately, no one other than Cynthia had seen it, for the knights’ conversations had died down and they had left.

Cynthia’s fist went flying as usual, but enduring the pain, with a “Thanks for opening my eyes,” Noel produced a false smile.

“This idiot! Is there anyone who would yawn in such a place!”

“I won’t relieve the tension if I stop. Because of all that difficult thinking, I yawned with my feelings of heartbreak. Sir Cynthia, could you please forgive me.”

Noel put on a serious looking expression to accompany her serious sounding words. It was a performance that would probably fool anybody meeting her for the first time.

“Stop lying and apologising insincerely!”

“Sorry.”

Noel quickly apologised. Cynthia’s fist seemed about to fly after all.

“Still, aside from being somebody who excels in the military arts, you’re even a knight and a commander of one hundred now. Seriously…”

“There’s no hope for the future, eh.”

The fist flew nimbly for Noel’s head, and Noel clutched her head and crouched low.

“Listen well, Knight Noel. You’ve become a commander of one hundred who will lead men. Carve into your heart that you must now keep yourself dignified, and follow regulations!”

“I understand it really well!”

Standing up, and with an exaggerated nod, she pinned the rank insignia she had just received to her chest. The glittering and sparkling icon looked sharp. Showing it proudly on her chest, she met eyes with Cynthia as a vein bulged at her temple.

“You look very pleased, but I’m a senior commander of one hundred. In summary, it means that you still have to watch your words!”

“Yup, I understand from the bottom of my heart!”

Cynthia sighed, wondering if Noel didn’t totally lack comprehension. After gently patting Noel on the back, she walked out while humming a tune.

“By the way, you easily came up with a surname. Did something interest you about the Vosheit name?”

“Nope, not really. But I couldn’t think of anything else so I figured it was good enough, eh, Lord Edrich.”

“That makes me uncomfortable, so call me Cynthia. Don’t call me Lord either.”

“I see. Yup, it’s like that then. It’s better if Cynthia is Cynthia, after all.”

Noel floated a childlike smile with no trace of malice.

Together with Cynthia, she exited the castle. The sun’s light glistened on her new decoration. Nodding in satisfaction, Noel began to run at a quick pace. It had been Cynthia’s question earlier as to whether or not she really had only thought a little bit before deciding on her name. Worried that if she talked about it she may have been laughed at or even scorned, she had dodged the question without thinking. It was true, by using the Vosheit surname, she had given “meaning” to her own given name. She had the good name Noel, and the bad name Vosheit. A shadow was born behind each blinding beam of the sun. The sun created both light and shadow, and she wanted to create a name that brought the two things together. The name Noel was from the strange cat in the picture book. As Noel was a very suitable name, it was best to usually be referred to by it.

Then there was “Vosheit,” the name carved into Noel’s bident. Written in a blood red design that, though it seemed about to wash away, would not be removed. Noel did not know what significance it had, but she thought that it couldn’t be good. The spear was one of her treasures, but there was no mistake that it wasn’t a wonder product. Conversely, it could only be thought of as an accursed weapon. It burned all those that touched it aside from Noel, and from time to time she felt that it was sucking in power. Furthermore, she had the feeling that she could hear something coming from it on the night after a rainy day. She felt like she would be pulled in by that strange voice that seemingly came from nowhere, so at those times she hurriedly went to sleep. More importantly, as long as she could endure it, it could produce fire, it didn’t rust, it looked cool, and her hands had grown accustomed to it. It seemed like a once in a lifetime kind of thing, and because she did not understand its significance, she had figured that it would be fine if she made the sinister characters into her name.

“A name just for me? Everyone probably wanted one too.”

Honestly, anything other than a number was okay with her. Whatever her surname was, her current self was still Noel after all. Noel had to continue on for everyone’s

sake. She had to hold on, hold on, and keep holding on until the very end; always advancing just like she promised she would.

Author's Note:

Noel Vosheit, Commander of One Hundred

Quite distinguished. She's become one with her own personal contingent of soldiers.

Each has his own salary, and because she must look after them, she shall be careful not to employ too many.

Translator's Note:

Noel's surname when pronounced in katakana sounds like bosheit, a German word for malice. Also, Riglette sounds suspiciously like regret, but I'll ignore that for now.

PDF by: traitorAIZEN